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SHARDS

Two Teens' Flight for Life

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SHARDS

Two Teens' Flight for Life

Michael G. Kesler

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To Luba,

the heroine of this story

Dedication

Shrapnelled shards of a shattered past
Sear my soul and pierce my mind.
Alas! I have written these pages at life's dusk
Our dead to honor as well as wounds to bind.

...And, also, to add wings to my humble prayer that
This stock from Sarah and Abraham begotten,
Its teachings, its culture, with pain and courage bred,
Shall not perish, nor be forgotten!

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Foreword

I take great pleasure in writing this foreword to Michael Kesler's fascinating and significant memoir of survival in the face of impending annihilation. He tells a memorable tale that very few can tell, as the vast majority of Polish Jews did not survive the Holocaust. A youth sixteen years of age, and a sister three years older, flee their home in the Ukraine ahead of the advancing German armies in June 1941. Suspense builds as the siblings escape east amidst roving German tanks and strafing aircraft. A few months later, the youngsters settle near Stalingrad where they spend a brutal winter, nearly perishing from hunger and cold. The following summer, they venture several thousand kilometers east, to Uzbekistan, where they survive, just barely, through the rest of the war, with the help of sympathetic Jews and non-Jews.

As a native son of an American-born mother, I had no direct experience of the Holocaust. But attendance at a Yom Kippur Yizkor service (memorial service for the dead) in Israel many years ago had a lasting impact on me. This service happened to take place in one of the last of the Maabarot, Israeli, transit camps for new immigrants arriving after 1948. Most of the younger couples with children had already been placed in new housing, leaving only the older people who remembered all too well their losses. As the service proceeded, the extent of their agony became abundantly clear. I have never before, or since, heard such anguished weeping. It was as if the many dead, with the enormity of their suffering, had entered the consciousness of the living, and we were now hearing their cries of horror at experiencing their fate.

After the war, Michael and Luba return to their hometown and find it devastated, with nearly all its 8,000 Jews, including their family, in mass graves. Most of those who survived were those who, like Michael and Luba, had fled the German armies as they invaded Soviet territory, which included eastern Poland from 1939-1941. The book chronicles the atrocities and mass executions of the Jews in Dubno and neighboring towns, as told by some of the survivors of these heinous crimes. When I think of the faces of the men at that Yizkor service long ago, I could easily see Michael as one of those survivors bitterly mourning the many dead of his family, friends, and townspeople.

Yet, as in many cases (sadly not all) of Holocaust survivors, the horrendous past is not necessarily a prologue to the future. At the end of the war, Michael and Luba depart for the West, ultimately arriving in the United States. The young people make highly successful lives here, including many children and grandchildren, and professional accomplishments at a very high level.

Surely, the tenacity of the human spirit is a legacy of their journey. But there is more. In writing this memoir, Michael seeks to memorialize the past in ways that will be unforgettable. Hence, we are not only exposed to the death and destruction of an entire European society, but also to a compelling tale of adventure. Once one starts reading this story, it is almost impossible to put down. Even though we know that the outcome is survival, the story is written in such a way that the suspense is carried from chapter to chapter. The reader is inexorably pulled forward. This was my experience in reading the

book; I hope it will be the same for many more readers, especially younger ones who may identify with this tale of ultimate success in confrontation with overwhelming odds.

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Introduction

In the years of 1939-1945, the Germans killed, often with the help of the local population, 6 million Jews. Approximately half of that number represented nearly all of Jewry who lived in Poland before 1939, except for several hundred thousand who fled to or through Soviet Russia. Most of the three million Jews died in gas chambers and crematories of concentration camps. Approximately one third of the victims were executed and buried in mass graves on the outskirts of the towns of western Ukraine and Belarus, part of Poland before 1939. Eastern Ukraine and Belarus, part of the Soviet Union, contain mass graves of an additional half-a-million Jews.

Historical and eyewitness records document the crimes the Germans committed in the concentration camps. There is far less documentation of the mass executions in the Ukraine and Belarus. The Ukrainian and Belarus governments and populace are actively erasing records and physical evidence of the mass graves (See References, Bartov).

This book relates the story of my sister, 19, and me, 16, fleeing our home in Dubno in western Ukraine in 1941 ahead of the German armies, our stay in the Soviet Union, our return after the war to Dubno, and witnessing the mass graves of the Jewish population, including our parents and relatives. During the past two-and-a-half years, I have reconstructed, with my sister's help, details of our lives during those years. In the process, I have relived the events, thoughts, and feelings of the six most important years of my life.

These pages record the experiences, as if I had written them at that time. I have chosen the genre of "creative non-fiction" to make the story told in these pages more vivid and compelling.

Chapter 1: Leaving Home -

The Day of Judgment

Split Decisions

I had just turned sixteen – I remember it well –
I was obsessed with the thought, nagging and sweet,
to surprise my classmate Sophie and tell
I admired her and would love her forever, indeed.

But it was not to be, and that gave me pain.
On that day, June 22, 1941,
the world I had known turned insane,
as Hitler's war on Russia had begun.

On the third day of the war news spread that
the Russians were fleeing and German tanks were near.
Then Stukkas roaring set the town's castle aflame.
The day grew long, filled with panic and fear.

Yet the day was short, too short to abort
life implanted with love and patience
through scores of generations. Too short
for the young and fit to tear apart
from family, friends, and sweet ties of the heart.

Painful quarrels and bitter debate
erupted in each household, and led in dismay
to final verdicts of every Jew's fate:
who shall leave and who shall stay,
who shall live and who shall die...

As night descended, full of awe and dark,
the gates of heaven shut, and the Devil's verdict came stark:
eight thousand would stay and die, shot in pits,
except for a few who'd crawl out amidst
layers of bleeding, dying kin.

Most of two hundred who'd flee would live in
a jungle, ruled by cunning, cruelty-prone chance,
violence, hatred, and the devil's dance.

It was June 24, 1941, the third day of Hitler's war against Russia. It was also the third day since I turned 16. I woke up and heard my sister Luba's voice in the adjoining room. I looked across the room and saw the couch open with bedding on it. Luba had come home. "Luba is here" rang in my mind. Luba, my older sister, had been away in Rovno, a town some 30 kilometers northeast of our town, Dubno, studying at the regional teachers college. Mom and Dad had worried that Luba might be cut off from us in the turmoil of the war.

I put on my trousers and shirt and ran into the other room. The room combined my parents' sleeping quarters, the dining facilities, the central stove, and my parents' dressing area. It was the room where the family spent most of its time together. Mom and Luba, flushed and agitated, were at the large table. I glanced at Luba; I hadn't seen her for a while. She looked beautiful; her face had become more rounded, her eyes sparkled with vivacity; her brown braid had gotten longer, hanging down almost to her waist. She looked very much like Mom—short with a narrow frame, slender, her face with regular features—except for her large gray eyes, light skin, and brown hair, which were more like Dad's. But her demeanor and agility of mind and self-confidence were like Mom's.

I greeted Luba and asked why she was upset.

"The Germans have broken through the front and the Russians are fleeing," Luba said heatedly.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

She told me her physics professor was a reserve colonel in the army. "He took me aside and told me the bad news. He urged me to go home and make sure we all leave immediately."

"That is silly talk, Luba!" Mom exclaimed. "You want me and Dad to abandon everything and just run away, like crazies?" Mom reminded Luba of the time in September 1939 when we had left our home fearing the Germans advances, and found Ukrainians occupying our home when we returned a week later.

"We have a choice. We leave or we stay here and wait to be killed," Luba said sharply.

"You think you and your professor know everything!" Mom shouted. "Napoleon tried to conquer Russia and he didn't do so well. Let's pray Hitler—may his name and memory be blotted out – does no better."

"In the meantime, the Germans will probably kill us all," Luba shouted back.

"We met the Austrians and some Germans during World War I, and we have lived on. It was the Ukrainian Petlura and his gangs who killed my brother at the end of the war!" Mom yelled in a high-pitched voice as she broke down and cried.

I felt Mom's pain. She had often told us of her daring mission to ransom the severed head of her brother, Mekhel, from Petlura's gang. My uncle had been my mom's favorite sibling.

Dad returned from morning prayers at the *Shul.* He had been gone for weeks, working 10-12 kilometers away as a forester for the Soviet government. He had come home the day before, on foot, to rejoin the family. I was delighted to be with him. He was

gentle and full of love. He had been concerned by the outbreak of war, but reassuring news of the Soviet army beating back the Germans uplifted his spirit.

Not now! He looked like a changed man. His face was ashen and perspiring; there was froth on the corners of his lips; his eyes were bloodshot and bulging—as if ready to fall out—and had a wild look about them. I became frightened. This was not the man I knew. Dad was even tempered and hardly ever raised his voice. I never remembered him being angry or in panic.

We were no strangers to adversity, and Dad had always been there to calm us that all was well. I remembered the shock when he, together with other Jews, had been fired from a prestigious position as a forester with Graf Zamoyski, a wealthy Polish nobleman with huge landholdings. Dad was deeply hurt, and he hardly spoke to me, or anybody, for weeks on end.

After a while, Dad regained his energy and began a feverish search for ways to emigrate to Palestine and for means to make a living there. But the British made entry to Palestine increasingly difficult. Instead, Mom opened a dry goods store and Dad joined her in the enterprise. Sure, Dad missed his profession, but he adapted.

"Where have you been so long, Moyne?" Mom asked. "You look upset."

"There is a lot of fear and panic. There is bad news of the Germans breaking through the Russian front with lots of tanks. Some people in the *Shul* are preparing to leave town," Dad said with uncharacteristic speed, as if rushing to beat time.

"So what do you think, Moyne?"

"I think we should gather whatever belongings we can and leave before the Germans get here."

"What are we going to do? What are we going to live on? Leave everything and become penniless beggars in a foreign land? And what about the Ukrainians? They have plenty of Jewish blood on their hands. I don't know who are worse, they or Hitler's gangs."

"Mom, how can you say that! You have been sending me newspaper clippings of the Germans hanging and shooting Jews and building concentration camps. Are you forgetting all this?" Luba screamed.

"I know how brutal the Germans are," she said. "I know of Hitler's hatred of the Jews. But what good will it do for him to start mass killing innocent civilians? How many Jews can Hitler kill, after all, a thousand, two thousand?"

The arguments, the shouting, the pleading went on and on. Mom went into the kitchen and Luba joined her to prepare some food.

I moved closer to Dad and grabbed his hand to quiet him down.

"Your Mom is tough, isn't she?" he said with a forced smile. I felt for Dad. I felt he was right, wanting us to leave, and that Mom was being stubborn.

My mother was a talented woman. She didn't have much formal education, but she was well-read, particularly in Russian literature. She was also more worldly than Dad, who had come from a small *Shtetl*. She was the oldest of four sisters. After the death of her father, who was a prominent lawyer and a descendant of a well-respected, old family, she had worked side-by-side with Grandma to provide for the family. They began to manufacture and market candy. She was the one who tended the candy store at the corner of Grandma's property.

The havoc of World War I and the tragedy that befell the family when Petlura's gang had killed her beloved brother, as well as a rather impoverished married life, had made her resilient and resourceful, but also tough and difficult. She showed a superior air to Dad, and was often quarrelsome and abusive to him.

Mom and Luba returned from the kitchen with poached eggs, fried potatoes, and salad. We ate quietly. Then Grandma came.

Grandma, my mother's mother, the matriarch of the Guberman family, lived a couple of blocks away, but I never remembered her visiting us. Her coming now alarmed me. She was in her early 80s and she looked it. She was a stout, healthy woman, but a hard life left marks on her deeply wrinkled face. Her lips were folded, hardly visible, since she had few teeth left.

"Manya, Monye, I have heard the bad news. What do you want to do?" Grandma asked sharply.

"I don't know, mother-in-law," Dad answered, "Luba has just come from Rovno where her professor advised her that we should all run away."

"And you'll leave me, Peshia, and Heniek here with the Germans?" Grandma exclaimed in anger.

"Mother, don't worry. I don't believe in running away," Mom said. "It would be foolish at our age to become roving beggars in the wilderness. We will just have to do the best we can to wait out this horrible war."

My parents and Grandma continued their exchange, but it became clear that Mom's argument had prevailed. We would stay. Grandma was ready to leave. Mom asked that I take her home.

We walked into the street flooded with sunlight. It was a warm, beautiful day with birds chirping away. The sky was pale blue; the scent of acacia and lilacs filled the air. Summer was upon us; nature was bursting with life and excitement.

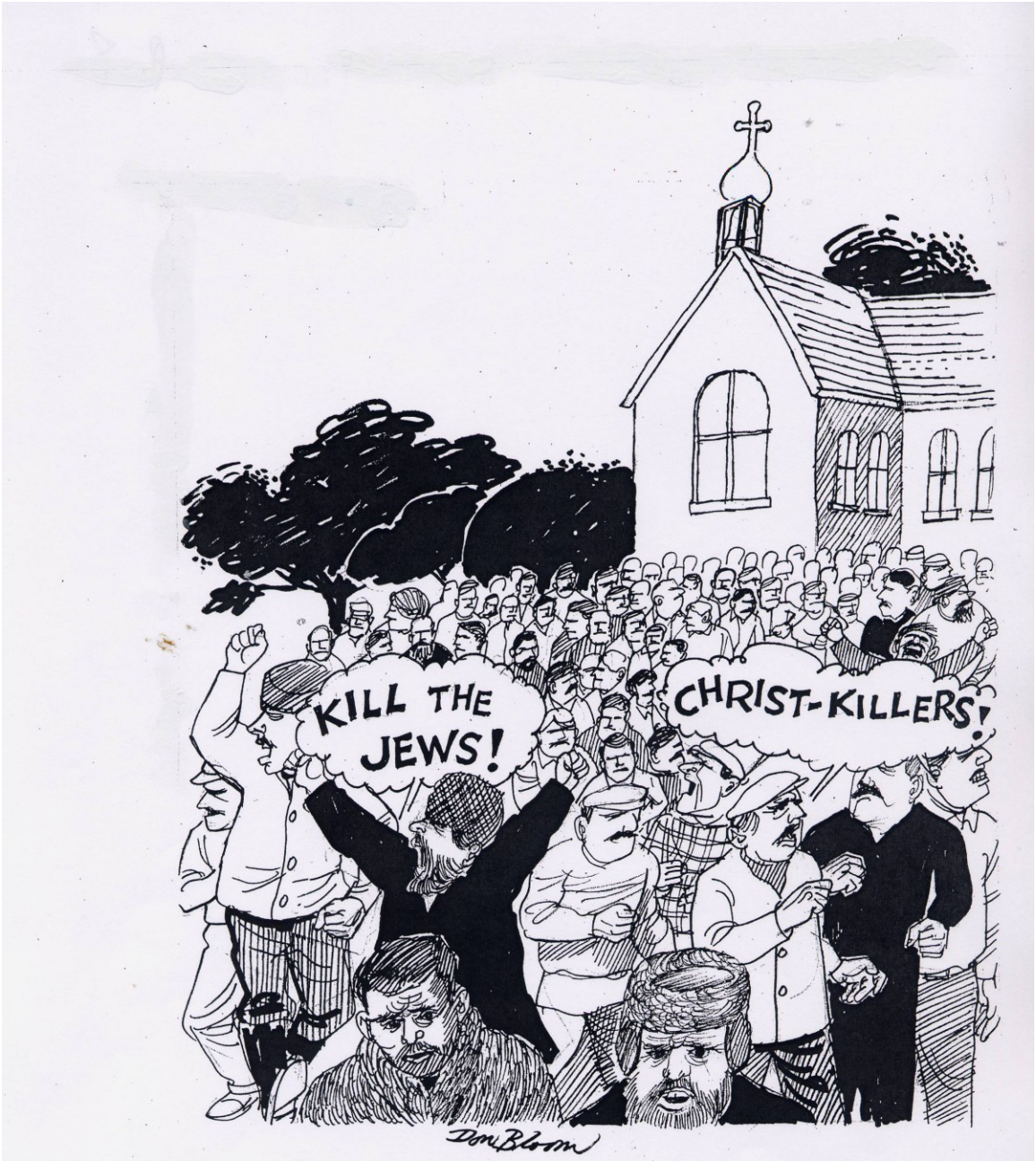
I felt confused. The quarrelsome exchanges between Mom, Dad, and Luba, the worrisome visit of grandma had left me in a quandary. There is a war going on, somewhere between Dubno and the border just 70 kilometers west of Dubno. But there's no sign of war here. Are Dad and Luba right – should we flee? Or is Mom right – should we stay? The panic in Dad's eyes haunted me. I trusted him and his instincts. The thought of leaving began to flood my mind.

I walked with Grandma east on Berka Yoselevicza. We reached the end of our block. On the opposite corner of the side street was the home of my Uncle Avrum, a large white house with black shutters and a shingled roof. He owned a pharmacy and was quite prosperous. He had two daughters and a son, who was a lawyer living in Vilna.

Grandma and I turned right onto a narrow side street. The din of rumbling vehicles surprised me as we approached Panienska, the main street of Dubno, where she lived. Motorized vehicles and trucks filled with soldiers clogged the street. We turned left on Panienska and passed the Greek Orthodox Church, a beautiful structure. Its doors were swung open; worshippers were chanting inside. Several years earlier, Luba and I used to sneak into the church to listen to the beautiful choir during holiday services.

The pogrom of 1937 ended our curiosity and admiration. On Easter Sunday, the overflowing crowd of the church came out enraged, shouting, "Kill the Jews, the Christ killers!" As they fanned out, with stones and sticks, they attacked Jewish households and stores. We were holed up in our home until the noise subsided. In the evening we

ventured out and saw the resulting devastation: broken windows with glass filling the sidewalks, looted stores with merchandise strewn on the street, and a number of wounded



The Easter Parade

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Don Bloom, E. Brunswick, N.J.

Jews who had tried to defend their property. So, that is what the message of the minister was on the sacred day of Christ's Resurrection, I thought as we passed by.

I shared my thoughts with Grandma. She told me several pogroms had followed in 1938 and 1939, while I was away studying in Ostrog.

"I thought they would kill us all, just as during Petlura's terror," she said.

We reached Grandma's home. At the front of the property was her candy store, now abandoned and boarded up. Grandma's living quarters were in a large, sprawling ranch set back deeply in the yard, surrounded by tall oaks. She had rented one wing of the large house to a Soviet official.

Heniek was playing outside with his mother, and I joined them. My Aunt Peshia was in her early 40s but looked much older. Her face was wrinkled, her light brown hair disheveled; her prominent gray-bluish eyes showed worry and sadness.

Peshia, my mother's younger sister, had been an associate professor of history at Warsaw University. In 1937, the university fired all Jewish academicians. She then came with Heniek, her baby son, to live with her mother in Dubno. Her husband, a lawyer, had stayed in Warsaw with his parents to settle his business. But he was unable to leave Warsaw. Under the Soviets, Peshia became a high school teacher, and Heniek grew into a beautiful child with whom I spent much time playing.

I embraced her and asked her thoughts about what was happening.

"I am afraid things are not good. I just listened to short-wave radio news from London. The Soviets appear to be in full retreat. I wouldn't be surprised to wake up in the morning with the Germans in town."

I told her about the arguments at home with Dad and Luba wanting to leave and Mom insisting we stay.

"Your mother has seen a lot of tragedy in the past, and she's not easily frightened."

"Are you?"

"Yes. I haven't heard anything from my husband, ever since September 1939 when the Germans came into Warsaw. Who knows if Yulek is still alive or rotting away in one of the camps."

"So, what are you and Heniek going to do?" I asked.

"I can't leave my mother alone, and I certainly can't take her with us; I have to stay. I think that you and Luba, at least, should leave, and the sooner the better," she said firmly.

My aunt's words reaffirmed my conviction that we should leave, or at least Luba and I should leave if Mom persists to stay. The idea of leaving began to get hold of me, but I wanted to convince my friends to leave as well. I decided to see my friend Henry, some ten minutes away from our house.

Henry had come to Dubno, when his parents and he fled Warsaw in September of 1939 and moved in with his aunt and uncle. In the fall of 1940, the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, deported his parents to Siberia, while Henry was away with friends in the countryside. When he had returned, he stayed with his aunt and uncle.

Henry became my closest friend. We were both enamored of science and avidly read Soviet scientific journals whenever we could get our hands on them. We were enchanted by articles written by Danish-born Peter Kapitsa and by the Jewish physicist

Leo Low on the subjects of superconductivity near absolute zero, 3-D visualizations, and nuclear physics. We vowed to pursue scientific careers after graduation.

I found Henry in the kitchen with his aunt and uncle, embroiled in the same heartrending dilemma —to stay or to leave. I explained the discussions and indecision in our family.

"I believe, though, that Mom has prevailed, and we will stay," I said.

"That is what we decided to do as well," said Henry's aunt. "We are too old to start life anew as beggars."

I looked at Henry with pleading eyes; he looked at me with sadness. He didn't utter a word, nor did he need to. I understood from his gaze that he would not leave his aunt and uncle.

I left Henry disappointed and sad. I felt desperate to have my friends join Luba and me, if we were to leave home.

Sophie's name struck me like an electric shock. I must see her! Sophie had been my classmate during the past two years; in fact, she took almost all the same courses as I did, and she was a tough competitor. She was by far my smartest female classmate and most often had the highest scores. The first year that I knew her, I treated her as if she were a boy, competing with me. Last year I began to feel an attraction, a longing to be with her. She lived near the post office, halfway to our high school, the *Gymnasium*, which was a kilometer from my home. I often would leave early in the morning and wait at the post office until I saw her at the corner. Then I would dash out to greet her with a lame excuse of depositing a letter or delivering a package. We would walk the rest of the

way to school together, but I was tongue-tied and awkward and found it hard to engage in any conversation Sophie initiated.

Sophie was a bit taller than I--everyone in class was taller; she was statuesque, with light brown hair, dark eyes, and lovely facial features. She loved literature and poetry and had a beautiful voice. As the year passed, I became convinced she was the most beautiful girl, and I secretly hoped someday I would marry her.

Sophie lived with her mother and her grandmother on her mother's side. Her father had passed away, and her mother was the provider, working as a nurse in the hospital.

I unlatched the door of the fenced yard of Sophie's home, and saw her at a table on the porch, reading a book. She looked up as she saw me approaching.

"What a surprise! What brings you here?"

"I thought I would stop by to say hello.

"And you haven't even had to take anything to the post office?" she said with sarcasm.

"Stop teasing me."

"I don't really want to tease you. I just want to let you know that you don't need an excuse to walk or talk with me. You know, we girls have a sixth sense; it's called intuition. I can tell very well that you like me, so you don't have to be so shy. You have nothing to fear you know. Come, sit down."

She moved over to make room for me at the table.

"Now, tell me why you really came."

I recounted to Sophie the heated discussions in my home and the dilemma of whether to stay or leave. I told her about my sister's message from her professor and about my brief meeting with my aunt, whom she knew well. I told her about my own feelings and urge to leave.

"Leave where?" she cried. "You know, tanks and airplanes can move much faster than one can by foot. If the Germans have broken through the Soviet Army's front, they will be able to conquer much of the Ukraine in no time. And if they want to kill us, I'd much rather die here than somewhere in a strange place."

I listened. Then, mastering all my courage I turned to her. "If Luba and I leave, will you come with us; will you come with me?" I heard my heart pound as I spoke those words, and I must have blushed with excitement.

"Mekhel," she said, "you talk like a true teenager. You make it sound like a picnic, like a *lag b'omer* outing. Do you have an address to go to? I know that you like me and I like you too just a little bit, but I am not ready to run off with you, not at this troubling time."

She paused, got up, and put her hand on my shoulder. I got up to face her.

"Be serious, Mekhel. My grandmother is ill, my mother works hard to support us, and we try so very hard to be together and survive. How could I possibly leave my mother alone?" She spoke with gentleness that belied the firmness. She was agitated and blushing.

Her words were broken by an explosion that rocked the house and the yard. We looked up and saw several Stukas dropping bombs—like inverted finned bottles—near

the famed castle along the Ikva River across from the high school. Several powerful explosions came in succession.

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Sophie screamed and fell in my arms, trembling with fear. As she embraced me, I felt shivers go through me and warmth overwhelm me as if my whole body were melting.

"Sophie! Sophie darling! What's happening?" shouted her grandmother, coming down the stairs. Sophie pushed me abruptly aside.

"Mekhel, you better leave. Run back to your home!" she said and ran inside to her grandmother.

I was in shock. I felt as if somebody had torn a part of me. I was hurt, and I was angry. Sophie dismissed me as if I didn't much matter. She didn't think much of running away either. Didn't she see the danger? I was disappointed with myself, too. I should have stayed and told her grandmother that our lives were in danger and that we must leave. I felt abandoned, yet more determined to leave.

I ran back home through Panienska and reached Berka Yoselevicza. The street was filled with people, frightened and agitated. They joined in clusters moving in excitement, as bees around a beehive. I was shocked by the dramatic change of the street that an hour or so earlier had been quiet.

I reached my home. Luba was in front, buttonholing neighboring friends. As I approached, Luba turned sharply toward me. "Where have you been? There is news that the Germans are now in the western suburb, Mlinov. Mom wants us to leave!"

"Why did she change her mind?"

"The Feyersteins from across the street came over and pleaded with her that she should let us go since the Germans would almost certainly grab the young men first, and Mom asked me to go with you."

We entered the house. Mom was busy packing two small valises with underwear, a change of clothes, and a couple of sweaters. She had also prepared a few sandwiches and found our winter leather boots.

"Dad and I decided you and Luba should go, and we will stay here; I don't believe the Germans will bother with us old people but you, Mehele, especially you, are in great danger of being picked up by the Germans. Go away until things quiet down. Maybe it's for a day and maybe forever," she said as she broke down and cried.

I saw my mother turn into a defeated woman. It seemed as if all the awesome burdens of a difficult life converged to crush her. Her penetrating gaze lost its focus, her lips tightened, and her cheeks turned pale. Her wiry, erect frame stooped like a folded accordion. She was mum.

Then, as if awoken, she said, "If you have to move farther east, head towards Aunt Etie in Ostrog. I'm sure she and Uncle Sholem will welcome you with open arms. You liked them, didn't you, Mekhel, when you were studying in Ostrog?"

Thus a decision was reached, half of the family would stay, and half would leave. That is the way King Solomon would have decided, I thought, as I remembered his poignant adjudication between two quarreling women claiming ownership of a baby; "Split the baby in half," the King ruled.

Mom asked us to freshen up, change clothes, and put on the winter boots. I sat down to put on the boots and looked at Dad who was standing in the corner of the room.

He seemed drained of all strength. His face was pallid; his prominent eyes had lost their sparkle and looked flat and vacant. His lips drooped; his shoulders sagged, as if carrying a monstrous weight. He looked old and sad. More than that, he looked as if he had given up all hope. His eyes betrayed fear. He looked defeated.

I became frightened. I felt shivers running through my body. Should I leave Dad and Mom like this, I wondered.

"Here are two valises I prepared and all of the rubles I could find," Mom said as she turned to Luba. "Please take good care of your brother."

Then she hugged Luba and held onto her until she burst into tears and let her go.

She hugged me, kissed me with her face wet with tears and said softly, "I love you very much. Remember that, Mekhel."

I turned around, ready to leave when Dad called me back. He undid the golden chain of his Longines watch from the front of his vest. The watch had been a wedding gift from Grandma. Dad handed the watch to me.

"Here, Mekhel, take good care of this; it may save your life! And take good care of your sister." His voice was barely audible.

He embraced me and let me go. I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but I choked. I couldn't utter a word.

We left the house, our home. I opened my little valise and carefully deposited the watch with the chain. Soon we were joined by six young men with whom Luba had spoken earlier. Two of them, Hayim and Motel, were in their early twenties, neighbors from across the street; the other four – Joseph, Jacob, Nathan, and David – were teenagers from homes down the street. Hayim had a compass, Motel had a map, and we

had two flashlights to share. It was dusk. We were in a hurry. We wanted to be as far ahead of the Germans as possible. We also wanted to be far away from our homes, lest we changed our minds and turned back. I heard my heart pounding; I was gripped with fear and guilt as we began our journey into the dark night and beyond.

[See Appendix I – giving a history of Dubno and a map of its surroundings – and Appendix II – describing Barbarossa, Hitler's code name for the war against Russia and, particularly, the first week of the fighting.]

Chapter 2: Crossing the Old Soviet Border –

A Step Ahead of the Germans

Guide Posts of Flight

Just a neuron or two direct
an ant's tortuous trek
on a desperate flight to life
away from its burning hive.

It was not the compass, it was not great foresight,
it was not courage, no, not quite.

It was earth's feverish tremors which swept
the patch of the forest on which we slept,
the roar of planes spraying death, in flight
the flares lighting the sky at night,
and the thuds of shells from artillery guns
that guided our march eastward, away from the Huns.

We headed east on Berka Yoseleveecha, then zigzagged onto the main thoroughfare, Panyenska Street. The street was clogged with heavy motorized army equipment heading west, towards the front: tanks on giant carriers, self-propelled artillery with long heavy barrels, armored cars carrying helmeted soldiers, heavy trucks, and assorted vehicles. There was hardly room for us to walk, even in single file. Sentries soon forced us off the paved road. Hayim used his compass to lead us onto a parallel, narrow, dirt road, heading eastward. We walked for hours on the dirt road, filled with potholes, through hills and valleys, fields and forests.

The night was getting darker. Distant rumbling, like an erupting volcano, made me fear the darkness. A few hours into the night, Luba began to tire.

"My feet are killing me; the shoes are too tight," she said, nearly in tears.

I took her valise to lighten her load and told her to hold onto me. "Hayim, you're sure we're going the right direction?" I asked anxiously.

"Don't worry, I know where we are. I know where we're going," Hayim answered.

"But don't go so fast," Luba pleaded.

"If we don't go fast, the Germans will catch up with us. Don't you see?" Hayim countered.

Occasional flares in the distance brightened the sky all around us, confirming Hayim's concerns. About 2 a.m., exhausted, we rested. Near the road was a wooded area, filled with pine trees. The scent of the pine cones refreshed my senses. It reminded me of the forests of Lublin, where Dad had worked as a forester. That was so long ago and so distant, and yet so fresh in my mind – the picture of Dad taking Luba and me for long, sometimes all-day outings through the woods to pick hazelnuts and mushrooms. Occasionally, we would come to a sun-drenched, open field, filled with wild strawberries, warm and sweet. I remembered too the arithmetic exercises Dad teased us with as we walked, multiplication of double digit numbers.

I stretched out on pine needles with a sweater as a pillow, next to Luba. I heard her and the others fall asleep almost immediately, but I stayed awake. Dad's sad eyes haunted me. And I felt Mom's embrace; she held me so close, with her moist eyes against my face. "I love you very much, Mekhel, remember that," she reassured me. Dad and Mom must be so worried and so alone. We should have stayed with them. We should never have left them alone, I thought, full of remorse. Another voice protested: I should

have pleaded with them to abandon everything and come with us! I should have! I should have! I felt so guilty.

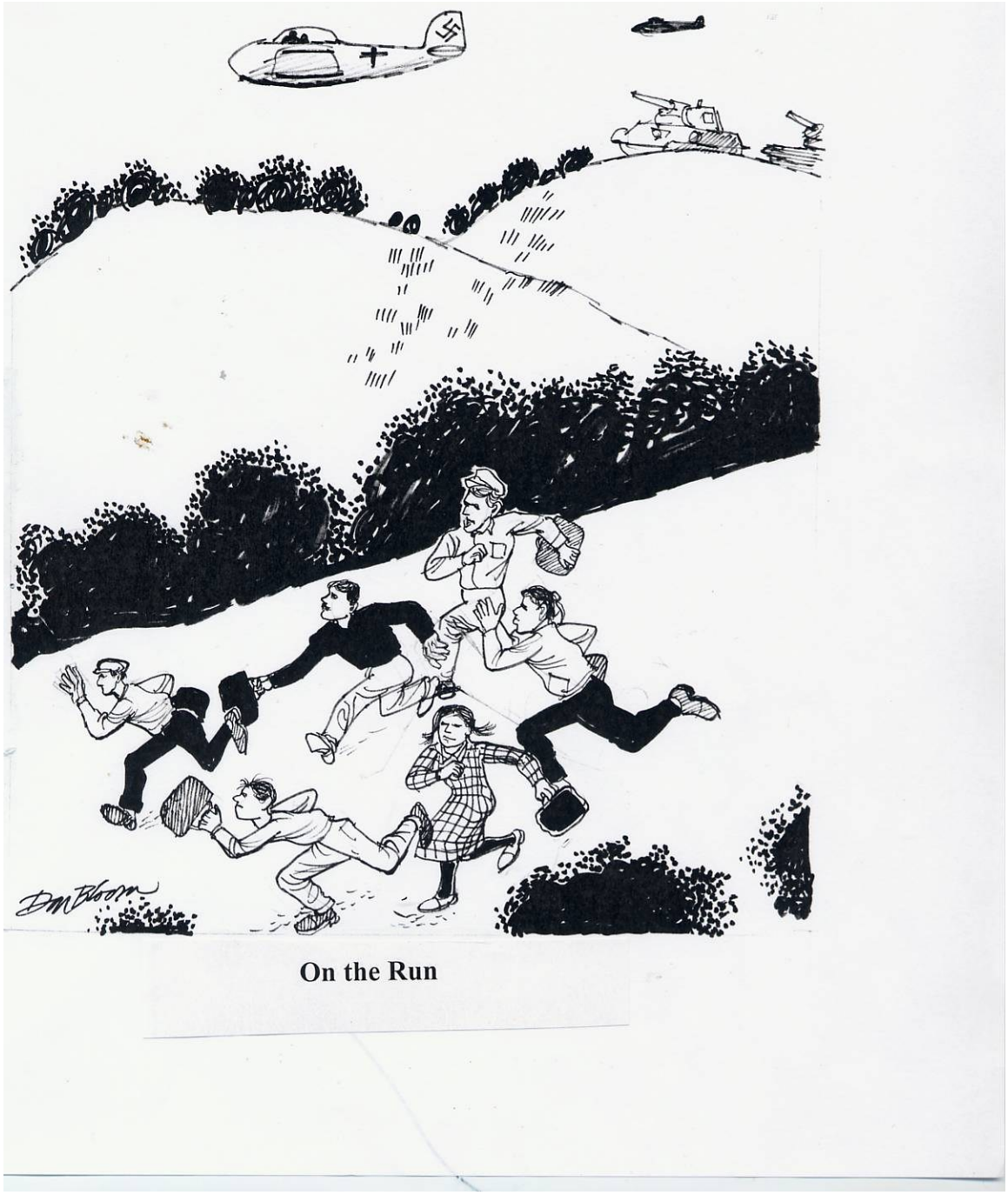
And Sophie? She might have changed her mind if I had been stronger and more forceful. She was so gentle with me and so understanding. I should have been more persuasive, more convincing, I should have.

Distant thumping, like thunder preceding a storm, filled me with panic. It became chilly. I shivered with cold and fear. I closed my eyes and dozed off...

I dreamed I saw huge monsters–looking like King Kong I had seen in the movies – surround me and march ever closer towards me. They were angry and threatening. They were so close I could hear them breathe. I wanted to run, but my legs were frozen, I could not move. I woke up. I was disoriented. Where was I? What was I doing here? A few hours earlier I had been with my parents. And now, we were alone running away from home, family, and people we had been raised with. Running where?

"You think you're going on a picnic?" Sophie's warnings echoed in my mind. "Where do you want to go, Mekhel? Do you have an address?" Her ironic questions rang in my ears. I felt good thinking of her, the thoughts calmed me down. I was glad I had been able to see her and tell her I liked her and wanted her to come with us. At last, I fell asleep.

We all woke at daybreak, as if on command. We went into the woods to relieve ourselves. Luba came back limping. She unlaced her boots and took them off. Her right foot was oozing from a burst blister. She changed her socks and put on her boots again, loosening her laces. We sat down and took out our sandwiches and had our first breakfast far away from home. It felt almost like a picnic, but a picnic it was not, as Sophie had



On the Run

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warned. I felt tired and worried. Where were we going? Where were we running? We were ready to resume our march when Joseph, our neighbor from across the street, spoke up.

"Hayim, you seem to be sure of where we're going," he said, 'but I'm not. I'm not sure I want to continue walking aimlessly. I'm not sure we can outrun German tanks anyway. And if the Germans come to Dubno, I'd much rather be with my parents."

Nathan, Joseph's friend, joined him. "I think I want to go with Joseph rather than keep walking."

"Are you crazy? Don't you hear the thunder of artillery all around? Don't you hear what's going on?" Luba started screaming. "You want to go back and get killed?"

"How do you know we're not going to get killed running away like crazies?" Joseph shot back. "You think we can run faster than tanks? You think we can run faster than German armored cars? Where are we running to, anyway?"

It was quiet for a moment, and then Luba resumed her pleadings. "We are going to our aunt in Ostrog, and I'm sure she would welcome all of us and let us stay with her. We're already halfway there."

"You talk silly; we're barely a few hours away from home and a few days from Ostrog," Joseph said. "Besides, what makes you think the Germans can't get to Ostrog? Anyway, I hope you can all make it, but I'm going back." Joseph spoke with finality. He and Nathan left.

The remaining six of us regained our composure and moved on. Hayim reached for the compass in his back pocket. "Oh my God," he shouted. "The compass is broken! I must have slept on it and crushed the glass."

"Now what are we going to do?" Adam asked with alarm.

"We'll just have to be more careful. You know, it's easy. In the morning we'll go east, towards the sun, and in the evening away from the sun," Hayim said.

"And what do we do in between and at night?" Luba asked with sarcasm in her voice.

"We'll have to manage," Hayim answered.

We were terribly thirsty. Passing a small farmhouse, we noticed a well, but there was no pail at the end of the rope. We knocked on the door of the hut. The peasant yelled to his wife, "Don't give anything to the dirty Jews!"

An hour later we saw a peasant in front of another hut. We explained we wanted to buy water. He agreed. We paid him some rubles, and he brought us a pail, which he attached to the rope wound on the crank of his well. We drank the fresh, chilly water and washed our faces. He also sold us some bread, and exchanged greetings with us. He had an easy smile and kind eyes. "Not all Ukrainians are of the same cloth," I thought.

We moved on. We were close to the main road clogged with vehicles. German planes began strafing the crowded road. We moved farther north away from the main road, then turned east.

It was past noon, and we were hungry. We found some tomatoes that weren't quite ripe and cucumbers on a farm near the dirt road, then sat down and had a meager lunch. Fatigue had set in; we were quiet and sad.

After lunch, we marched on through heavily wooded areas and lost our way. Small dirt roads lay ahead of us leading in several directions with no sign which one

would take us east. We took a chance on one of them but it led nowhere; we spent a few hours in vain. I was frightened. Will we ever find our way to Ostrog?

A while later we stopped at a farm and learned we were going north instead of east. The afternoon sun began to guide us, and we made good progress until dusk. We spent a second night in the woods. As I lay down, I heard the earth's tremors and distant sounds of artillery. I was worried: were the German tanks going to catch up with us as Joseph had feared?

We got up at dawn and had to move fast. Bursts of artillery grew louder and I detected rumblings of tanks in the distance. We had no time to waste. "Not so fast, not so fast," Luba pleaded. Hayim took Luba's valise, and I helped Luba along, particularly up the hills, as we walked. There was no way to mistake our direction; the dirt roads began to fill up with other escapees. Late in the afternoon of the second day, we reached the outskirts of Ostrog, 60 km. from our home.

The roads were filled with people on foot and carriages drawn by horses or cattle, all streaming eastward towards the old, pre-1939 Russian-Polish border. David, a member of our group, also had friends in Ostrog, so we parted after agreeing to meet the next day at an appointed place and time.

Luba and I hurried towards the home of Aunt Etie and Uncle Sholem. I remembered the way well, I used it so many times two years earlier as a student of the Hebrew school and a frequent visitor of my Aunt and Uncle. We reached my Aunt's home and knocked on the door. Aunt Etie was surprised when she saw me. "Come in. Come in," she said with affection, and called excitedly, "Sholem, Sholem, come here quickly!"

Sholem was effusive with hugs and words of love. I introduced them to Luba. Aunt Etie looked to me much older and smaller than when I had seen her last. Aunt Etie, my mother's half-sister from a previous marriage of my grandfather, was in her late 70s. She was very short. Her hair was completely white. She had lively, beautiful blue eyes, diminutive nose and lips. The nearly transparent skin on her face was filled with wrinkles. She had a kind and gentle smile. Uncle Sholem seemed to have aged as well in the past two years. He was as tall as I remembered him, certainly taller than Aunt Etie, Luba, or me. He had a narrow frame and face, an aquiline nose, thin lips, small brown eyes, and a white, thin beard. He wore a cylindrical *yarmulke* on top of his gray hair and a dark, long caftan.

We sat down at the large table in the middle of the spacious kitchen, which doubled as the dining room.

"Tell me, how did you get here?" Aunt Etie asked. "What's going on in Dubno? What's going on with the whole family? Come to think of it, let me get you something to drink. Wait until I come back." She returned with hot tea and some pastries, and Luba began to recount leaving our parents and spending the last two days on the roads and in the forest between Dubno and Ostrog. Then, Aunt Etie inquired about our grandmother and the rest of the family. Luba went on speaking for a while, but she was noticeably tired.

"Enough, Luba, enough," Aunt Etie said. "Let me prepare some hot water for you to wash up."

Shortly, she called us into the bathroom. Luba took off her shoes; her feet were full of blisters.

"Aunt Etie, would you have a couple of bandages?" Luba asked.

"Oh my, oh my, you'll need a lot of soaking and bandages; let me see what I can do," Aunt Etie said. I left Luba and Aunt Etie alone.

An hour or so later, the kitchen table was set for supper. We sat down to eat and resumed our conversation. We reminisced about the two years that I had spent in Ostrog, from 1937 to 1939, while studying at Tarbut High School. I'd lived with an older couple; however, I often visited Aunt Etie and Uncle Sholem, particularly on holidays.

Later, Aunt Etie took us to a small bedroom. "Here are your beds, children. Sleep well; you deserve a good rest," she said as she left us for the night.

It was past noon when I woke up the next day. My feet and my whole body were aching, and I could hardly move. I got up and went into the kitchen. Luba was up too. Aunt Etie was busy bandaging her feet.

"Good morning, Mekhel, you're finally up, ah? Come, let's sit down and have something to eat," Aunt Etie greeted me.

We sat down at the dining room table, loaded with food: all sorts of cheeses, sardines, fresh vegetables, fresh bread, and hot oatmeal. I liked it all; I couldn't stop eating, as we continued our conversation

A couple of hours later, Aunt Etie and Luba went to clean the dishes, and Uncle Sholem and I retired to the living room. We sat down.

"Mekhel, so what do you and Luba want to do? Where do you want to go next if the Germans get close to Ostrog?" he asked.

"We want to stay away from the Germans," I answered.

"And what are you going to do in the Soviet Union, even if they let you in?"

Uncle asked.

"We'll try to find jobs and a place to live, like everyone else. The Soviets claim they do not discriminate against Jews."

"Mekhel, didn't you hear of the fake trials of Jews by Stalin? Didn't you hear about the Jews he sent to slave labor camps in Siberia?

"Uncle, I do know it. The parents of my best friend, Henry, were picked up last July and sent away and he has never heard from them."

"You know, Mekhel, we Jews are often our own worst enemies. You know who organized and led the Communist revolution in Russia? Amienyev, ZhinKovyev, Trotsky, and many other Jews. And do you know what happened to them? Stalin killed them all! And here in Poland, many Communists were Jewish. No wonder the Poles hate us so much!" Uncle exclaimed with anger. His face became red as if on fire and his eyes filled up with tears. I waited until he quieted down.

"Uncle, when I studied here at Tarbut, I had a teacher of history. He was a hunchback, and he was an ardent Zionist. He felt that the Poles and the Ukrainians hated us out of jealousy because we lived mainly in the cities and towns, where life was better than on the farm. Also, we were different and we looked different, easy to single out and hate.

"You know, Mekhel, you're right! That's what it says in *The Book of Esther*. Haman said to King Ahasuerus, 'There is a people scattered and separate among the peoples in your kingdom, and their laws differ from all your kingdom's laws, and there is no use for the king to let them be.' I remember how well you chanted this on Purim, how well you knew the whole book by heart. Do you have a chance to study Talmud?"

"Yes, but only with Dad, when he's home. The Soviets closed all the Hebrew and Talmudic schools."

"Yes, Mekhel, I know, I know. The Soviets claim they're nice to the Jews, but they really don't want us to be Jewish. We have very few friends and a lot of enemies, but God will help. He helped us with Haman and he will help us with Hitler—may his name and memory be blotted out!"

I sat quietly and struggled with what Uncle had said. God helped us? Then why have so many of us been killed through the centuries? Why do we now fear for our lives? ...

* * *

Luba rushed into the room. "Uncle, Mekhel, I'm sorry to break in, but there's bad news. The Germans are on the outskirts of Ostrog. There's panic in the streets. We must leave immediately!"

I was stunned. Aunt Etie joined us and burst into tears. "Where are you going to go, children?" she asked.

"We'll cross the border and go into Russia, as far away as we can," said Luba.

Uncle Sholem and Aunt Etie saw the determination and firm gaze in Luba's eyes, and they understood. Uncle Sholem said, "Go, children, go, if you think you must. May God watch over you. Aunt Etie and I are much too old to join you."

"Wait! I'll prepare things for you," said Aunt Etie, as she hurried into the kitchen.

She came back soon with wrapped pieces of chicken, some bread, and rubles that she had found. She put everything into our little valises. Luba put on her winter boots and

grabbed the Band-Aids Aunt Etie had given her to protect her blisters. We embraced Uncle and Aunt, bidding them goodbye.

But Aunt Etie protested, "I will go to the border with you."

"Didn't we agree to meet with Hayim and the other members of the group?" I turned to Luba.

"There's no time for that. They are probably gone by now anyway. We must rush; we cannot waste any time."

We left the house and joined an endless stream of men, women, and children heading east towards the pre-1939 Russian-Polish border. As we drew closer to the border, the streets became clogged. The Russian guards at the crossing were not letting people through. I was holding onto Aunt Etie, lest she get lost in the crowd. Luba forced her way through to catch up with a small Soviet army truck. Then she began pleading with the drivers, "Please take us with you. Please take us with you."
Their eyes examined Luba, and they smiled to each other. It's the braids, I thought.

"Come on, young comrade." They motioned to her.

"Come on, Mekhel, quickly," Luba called.

I sensed the soldiers' disappointment as they saw me join her. But we were on the truck all right, moving slowly through the crowd. Aunt Etie was following the truck and reciting prayers. A few times she tripped and got up, tears rolling down her cheeks, all the while praying. I soon lost sight of her as she vanished in the crowd. I felt so sorry and so guilty. What was going to happen to her? I was ashamed of abandoning this wonderful old woman and her husband. Shouldn't we stay with them? Where are we running to, anyway? I was distraught and frightened.

Minutes later, we were at the border crossing. The soldiers made humorous remarks to the guards about the cute young lady and her little brother, and we were let through. Out of sight of the border, the soldiers turned to us and in a friendly way explained we should go left, to Slavutka, a village a few kilometers away, where we should be able to find shelter. They had to go in the other direction. We thanked them and started the trek to Slavutka. Soon we were joined by many other lucky people who had been let through the border, too.

It was getting dark as we reached a big hall of the *Gymnasium* in Slavutka, filled with escapees. We found a little space along the wall and sat down next to our valises. In one corner of the hall, two women were handing out containers of water. I went to fetch two containers and returned to Luba. We took out the pieces of chicken and bread Aunt Etie had given us and ate our evening dinner. Then, leaning against the wall, we fell asleep for the night.

Morning came, and we heard that the town was distributing food. We grabbed our valises and joined a long queue. Luba went ahead to speak to one of the policemen handing out food. "I'm here with my little brother, and we haven't eaten much. Could you please help us get some food?" she pleaded.

The policeman took a good look at her, smiled and addressed the crowd with great dignity and pomp. "Comrades! These two children have just come from the other side where they had not had much food for a generation, and they are starving. Shouldn't we let them in?"

I was surprised people would listen to him, but they did. We got containers of cabbage soup and slices of black bread, and we sat down on the grass to eat.

Suddenly, Luba got up and began to shout in Polish, "Hey, Leena! Paul! Wait for me, wait for me!"

"Mekhel, these are my friends from Rovno; I want to say hello to them," Luba said. She ran off to see the young people. I lost sight of them, as the crowd thickened; I got up and couldn't find them. I was petrified. "Luba, Luba!" I shouted in panic, but to no avail. I was frozen with fear as I lost all hope of finding her. An hour passed, and then I heard Luba's voice. "Mekhel, Mekhel! Hershl is here, Hershl is here!"

I turned around and saw Luba, Hershl, and a few others coming out of the police station, a small wooden building. Hershl and I ran towards each other. He embraced me and held me tight. I could hardly breathe; he was a strong man. He was shivering as he released me, and began sobbing.

"Mekhel! Mekhel! What a miracle to find you and Luba!"

I was overcome with joy and excitement as well. Hershl was my favorite cousin. I looked at Hershl: he was unshaven and disheveled. He seemed frightened; his prominent lips trembled, and his light gray eyes were blood-shot and bulging.

I turned to Luba. "Where have you been? I nearly lost my mind looking for you."

"The guards are very nervous here," Luba said quietly. "They heard me speak Polish and grabbed me and my friends into the police station, thinking we were spies or something."

"And Hershl?" I asked.

"Well, you know Hershl likes to talk loud, assuming people won't hear him. This time he talked a bit too loud to his friends in Yiddish, and they all landed in jail as German spies. We better get out of here in a hurry."

Hershl was with half a dozen people who had fled Lutsk ahead of the advancing German armies. They all looked exhausted, covered with dirt and dust. They had been on the road for more than three days. Hershl had been on business in Lutsk and could not return to Targowice to be with his family. Among the people accompanying Hershl were newlyweds, who were particularly distraught. The young woman was on the verge of collapse. The pair had been suddenly separated from family and friends in the midst of their wedding, stricken by panic at Germans marching into Lutsk. They were in their early twenties. The young man, Paul, was tall and slim; his bride, Zhenya, was not much taller than Luba. Zhenya leaned against Paul and held his hand, and Paul, in turn, caressed her dark, long hair. He was consoling her: "Don't cry my love, it's going to be ok, it's going to be ok."

I turned to Hershl asking about the rest of the family. "Who knows?" he said turning his eyes towards heaven. "Maybe He knows!"

Chapter 3: Making Our Way to Stalingrad – The Angels of Kirovograd

Seeking Refuge

We traveled on trains, quiet, unseen
destination "anywhere" (we were not keen),
passing fields, hills and ravines,
rivers and towns of the Ukraine.

Sleeping and eating with wounded and sick.
How did we do it? Ah! That was a trick.

Luba, Hershl, the newlyweds, four other friends of Hershl, and I left Slavutka and walked towards Shepetovka, a railroad center five kilometers north. Rumbling of artillery cannons and Messerschmitts overhead were constant reminders that the Germans were coming. Fear gripped my body again. Two hours later, we were at the Shepetovka railroad station, which was filled with echelons at a standstill. Some of the locomotives were heading west, others were heading east; some of them carried equipment and soldiers to the front, and others were filled with wounded from the front. Many of the latter had cattle cars with the doors open and soldiers on stretchers on the floors of the wagons, many of them bandaged from head to toe.

The platform was filled with people, holding bundles and valises, trying to board a train. Soldiers, with their rifles on their shoulders, roamed the platform to and fro and held back the crowd from jumping on tracks. No trains were leaving the station. We became apprehensive.

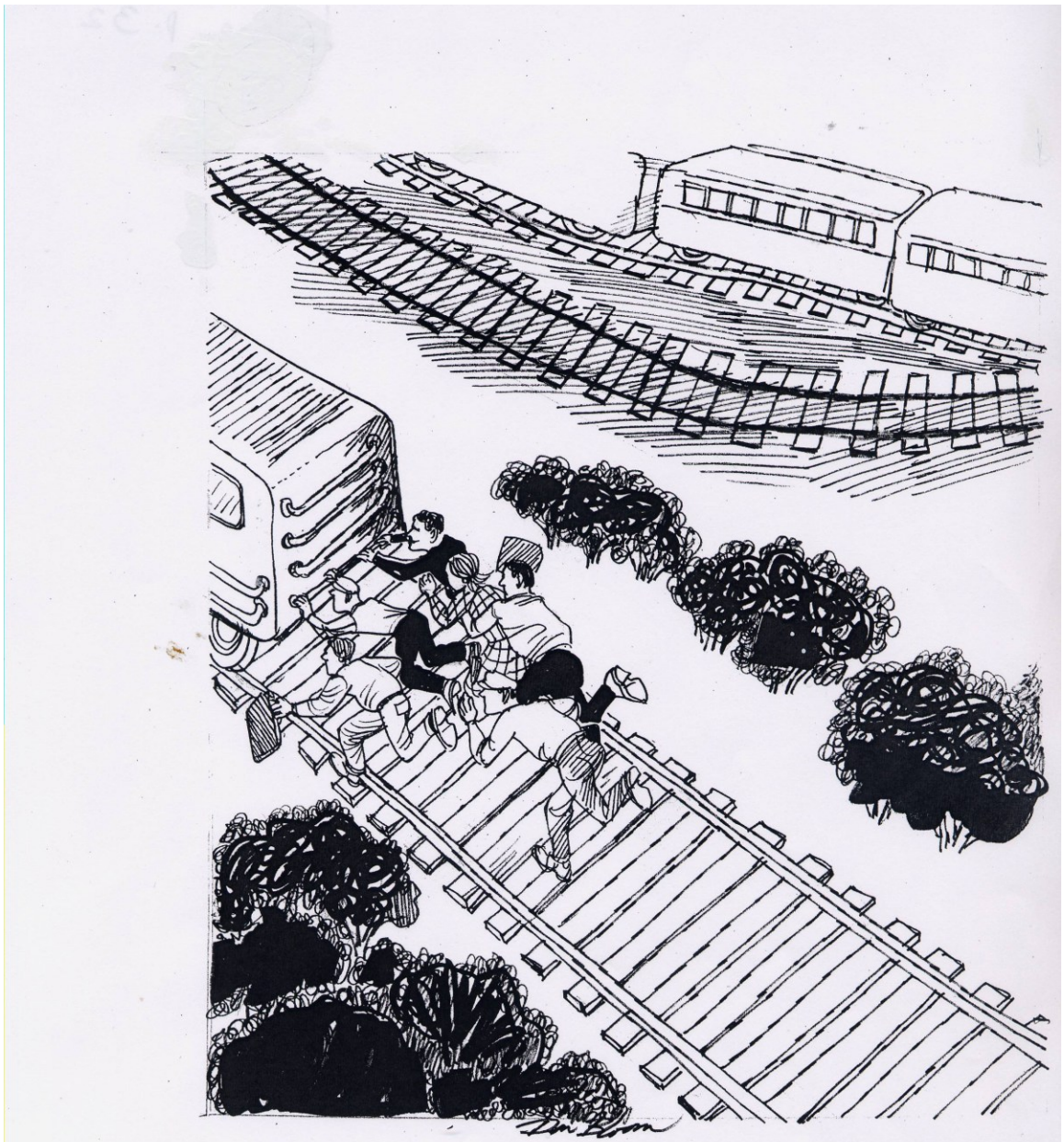
Hershl's friends noticed a small wooded area next to the station. We hid there and began a feverish dialogue about what to do next. Some of the trains had sentries at

the cabooses and still others on top of the train's wagons. Our only hope was to jump onto one of the trains heading east, but we feared being shot by the sentries.

Hershl suggested we wait until a locomotive sounded a whistle, then run out and jump on one of the wagons. The debate went on. Then a locomotive sounded a whistle, and we reacted instantly the way Hershl had suggested. Luba and I ran towards one of the passenger cars. She reached the steps at the head of the wagon and pulled herself up onto it. I waited until she was secure and lifted myself onto the steps towards the end of the wagon, with the train already in slow motion. Hershl, the young couple, and other friends were behind me and jumped onto the caboose.

I moved surreptitiously through the open door of the wagon and placed myself and my little valise in the corner next to the open rear. Soon, the door of the wagon closed and we were off, at a very slow pace, going east.

Among the wounded, a young uniformed soldier lay on his back, on the floor along the wall. His neck was torn apart, his trachea and windpipe exposed with blood spurting out with each pulsing of the heart. His neck cavity was filled with blood and, as he was trying to breathe, he was choking. His face was twisted in agony, and his eyes, although open, looked glassy. His hands were clenched, and his legs bent at the knees. His mouth was half open and his lips tightened as if to scream. An orderly with a Red Cross band on his arm approached the wounded soldier. He knelt down, took out his stethoscope, and listened to the soldier's chest. Then he slowly got up, looked around, pulled a revolver out of his back pocket, put the revolver at the temple of the soldier, and fired the shot. The soldier's legs recoiled convulsively, as if pulled by a puppeteer's string, then twitched again and again. His body contorted and tightened. The blood flow



Catching the Train

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diminished, and the soldier lay motionless. The orderly walked away to attend to other wounded.

I stood in the corner, quiet and scared. I wasn't sure the orderly saw me; I feared he might notice me and fire his gun again, at me. I had never seen a wounded, bleeding, dying man before. I was nauseated, but held back from vomiting with all the power I could muster. "Oh! Lord! What is man? He's just a driven leaf, a passing wind, a flittering dream." I recalled the liturgy of the High Holidays and its sorrowful chant I had sung as a soloist in the Great Synagogue of Dubno. And what of this young man who had given his life to fight evil? Was his soul going to heaven? Did he have a soul? Was there a heaven? There was a hell, for sure, and it was right here, all around!

A few hours went by. The train stopped at a small station, and Luba beckoned me. She had managed to make conversation and friends with some of the wounded and the orderlies. I joined her in the corner. Soon the soldiers were provided with the rations for dinner, and we were given some leftovers - dark bread and some pieces of meat. I felt queasy biting into the meat; I had never eaten non-Kosher meat. Luba noticed my hesitation. "You'll get used to it," she said with sarcasm.

"Where is Hershl? Where are the newlyweds? Where are the other people?" Luba asked.

"They were behind me, and I believe they all jumped on the caboose behind this wagon," I answered.

Luba got up. "I'm going to speak to somebody. Maybe they'll let them in to be with us."

Shortly, Luba, Hershl and his friends, and I jumped into the half-open doors of the cattle car, next to the passenger car Luba and I had been in. The car was filled with stretchers of less-critically wounded soldiers. Evening descended, and I began to feel more comfortable. Some of the wounded turned to us, friendly and eager to talk. There was a lot of groaning and cries of pain. I fell asleep.

The echelon moved at a snail's pace eastward. It often stopped to let through westbound trains, carrying supplies and troops to □□□the front. Two days later, on July 1, we reached the crowded station of Kiev, the capital of Ukraine.

We waited in the station for a long time. The radio loudspeakers were blaring martial music, and then a voice announced that Marshal Stalin would soon address the Soviet Union.

At noon, everything came to a standstill, there was an abrupt silence. Stalin's voice came through the loudspeakers, loud and clear. I was surprised to hear his heavy Georgian accent and his use of Russian vernacular. He spoke about the Soviet armies repulsing the enemy and he urged those in danger of being overrun by the enemy to burn food, supplies, factories, and warehouses, so as to make the Germans' hold on conquered territory untenable. He went on to extol the greatness of the Soviet Union and its leadership under the Communist Party and ended with a poignant phrase, "Future historians will surely note Hitler started the war, but Stalin ended it." Everyone burst into applause and began singing the Internationale in tandem with the radio orchestra.

I liked Stalin's speech. I was struck by his call for the people in the conquered areas to resist the enemy. It reminded me of Napoleon's invasion of Russia, portrayed in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which we had been assigned to read a few months earlier. In

1812, General Kutuzov, then the head of the Russian Army, surprised Napoleon and ultimately defeated him, not in battlefield victories, but by depriving his troops of food and shelter. Now Stalin was using the same tactics.

The mayhem continued as people were trying to board whatever train they could to escape. Meanwhile, Luba had run out to buy food, and to fetch water at the station. She returned with a handsome young lieutenant beside her. He had dark hair and dark lively eyes, and he looked confident and cheerful. He wore a lieutenant's hat, oversized, with a red ribbon on its rim. Luba introduced the lieutenant to us as Leonid Michayilvich Kaganovich, and told us he suggested we visit his family in Kirovograd.

"I'll be very thankful if you visit my family and bring them greetings from me," Leonid said. "I'm sure you will like my parents; they're wonderful people and will treat you like family."

We were overjoyed, and we disembarked. Leonid helped us to find a train headed southeast to Kirovograd. Luba, Hershl, the newlyweds, Hershl's other friends, and I boarded the train. We bid warm goodbyes to Leonid and were off.

This time we traveled as ordinary passengers, together with other refugees heading east. Luba took out a copy of the latest *Pravda*, the official party newspaper she had picked up at the Kiev station. As we perused the pages, our spirits sank. The papers were more explicit than the radio accounts about the war front. We did not have a map in front of us, but we knew enough about Poland and, at least, about the west European part of the Soviet Union, to recognize the disastrous truth about the Soviet Army retreat. Accounts of the "Southern Front" in particular mentioned the army's withdrawal from Levov and from the Lutsk-Rovno-Dubno areas and counterattacks near Shepetovka.

"Shepetovka! That's where we were just two days ago," I exclaimed with horror. "And what about Dubno? The Germans are in Dubno!" I was horrified.

We all fell silent, as if in mourning. It became clear to me that the fate of my parents, grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives and friends had been sealed. Slowly it sank into my consciousness that the world I had been born and raised in was gone. From now on, Luba, Hershl, and I would be on our own. I spent a restless, sleepless night, full of fear and worry. Later in the day, we arrived in Kirovograd and disembarked.

We made our way to the home of the Kaganovich family. We knocked on the door, and a short, dark-haired woman, with some gray patches welcomed us. It was Leonid's mother. She was thrilled to hear about her son and all too eager to take us into her home. We entered the spacious kitchen, where her husband sat at the table reading a paper. He got up as his wife introduced us and invited us to sit with him and chat.

He was in his 50s; he had brown hair interlaced with gray, light blue eyes, prominent lips, and facial features indistinguishable from any other Russian. He spoke a beautiful, literary Russian. He knew very little Yiddish, though he boasted that his mother did.

We soon learned that Mikhail Alexandrovich and his wife, Neena, were members of the Communist Party and were devoted to the Communist cause. Mikhail was an engineer, the head of a local factory producing arms, while Neena was the financial head of a meatpacking factory in town. They were both well read, and they eagerly corrected mistakes when I showed off reciting some poetry of Pushkin and Lematov. Yet despite

their obvious intelligence and education, they seemed to be poorly informed of conditions outside the Soviet Union.

"How did you survive the hunger of the "30s" in Poland?" Mikhail asked us. Though we assured him we had had no food shortages, both Neena and Mikhail later repeated that question. I remembered reading that the 1930s saw widespread hunger in the Soviet Union as Stalin forced collectivization of the farms in the Ukraine, the "bread basket" of Europe. It dawned on me that the Communist regime and party would deliberately portray the famine in the Ukraine as a global condition, certainly prevailing among the neighbors of the Soviet Union.

Neena prepared supper and we all sat down to eat our first decent meal in a week. She gave us *hors d'oeuvres*, crackers, and small pieces of herring, then cabbage soup with a meat base, then veal cutlets and potatoes. I felt touched by the goodness of these people in the strange, new land.

Neena and Mikhail took us around their spacious house, consisting of a living room with a piano, a library, two bedrooms, and a large bathroom. Neena was so taken by the lovely newlyweds that she offered their own bedroom to the couple. "Just for one night. It is your honeymoon night!" she exclaimed with a smile. She put Luba, Hershl, and me in the library, and she took the four other friends of Hershl to a neighbor, where they stayed for a few days. She invited us to wash up and gave us new underwear, insisting that her helper would take care of our laundry in the morning. Soon we retired in the miraculous haven of Eden.

The next week gave us a bit of rest. Neena and Mikhail treated us as their own family. While they were away working, their helper, a Ukrainian woman, looked after us

with great care. Luba, the "bookworm," immersed herself in the library; Hershl and I took long walks through the city streets and buttonholed neighbors to learn of their feelings about their country and the war. What struck me was the lack of tension or ill feelings between the few Jews that we met and the rest of the population. I was also impressed that so many women worked in the professions as well as in heavy manual activities, like driving trucks, usually reserved for men in Poland.

The horror of the war began to recede from my mind, and we felt comfortable, though in a strange environment. Yet, whenever alone or before retiring at night, I was bewildered by the frightening changes of my life and the lives of my family and friends.

My memories went back to my early childhood in a village near Lublin, where my father had been a forester for Graf Zamoyski. I was surrounded by villagers, some of whom worked for my father. They were kind to me and treated me like one of their own children. Later, I attended the village school, one classroom with grades one through four, where I was the teacher's darling. Indeed, when I was in the first grade, he would call on me to read fourth grade material to put the fourth graders (including my sister) to shame. "That's the way to read!" he would exclaim.

In 1933, Dad was dismissed from his position with the Graf, as were all Jews. We moved back to Dubno, where we had lived prior to Dad's employment with Zamoyski.

I entered public school. My first two years there were most pleasant. Poland had a love affair with France and the French Revolution, and the teachers reflected that attitude. My history teacher taught us the glory of the French revolution and the slogan of "Liberty, equality, fraternity." He emphasized that since the French revolution, the world had become more tolerant and a better place to live.

Two years later, we were being attacked by our Polish classmates on our way home. They called us "dirty Jews" and threw rocks at us. How did I become a "dirty Jew" in such a short time?

A new quota had been set up in 1937, limiting the admission of Jewish children to the Gymnasium, the high school, to just three out of a total of one hundred—even though the Jewish population in Dubno exceeded fifty percent! Jewish applicants also had to take special, difficult exams. I passed the exams and was told that I was on the waiting list, but I was not admitted. Why? I felt helpless. I faced a monster that drained my strength and cowered me into a midget. Bullies, my own classmates, made me ashamed of being Jewish. This explosive growth of Jew-hating was so weird, so painful. Had the world gone crazy?

The young newlyweds and other friends of Hershl decided to leave Kirovograd. They feared the Germans were advancing too fast and might overrun Kirovograd. Hershl, Luba, and I remained, enveloped in the goodness of the Kaganovich family.

Hershl and I became ever closer. He was some 20 years older than I, the son of my father's oldest of five sisters. He lived with his wife, Celia, and 3-year-old son, David, in Targowicze, my father's home village of some 2,000 people, most of whom Jewish. The village was 15 kilometers northwest of Dubno. Hershl had visited us often in Dubno, marketing hops with my father. He spoke very little, but he was a wonderful listener. As I told him about my school work and showed him my paintings, he expressed admiration and respect. He made me feel as if I were gifted and I would be a great scientist some day.

He almost looked like a younger twin of my father. Short, stocky with a strong physique and round expressive face, brown hair, with a tinge of red. He did differ in one respect from my father: he had unusually large ears. Mom used to comment that nature had a way of compensating for human infirmity. Hershl was completely deaf from early childhood, when he was thrown and stepped on by a horse. The accident nearly killed him. Surgery saved his life, but not his hearing. He had learned to read lips with great skill and that's how he communicated. He was good natured, warm, loving, and fun to be with.

He told me of my Dad's work in the woods in charge of cutting down huge tracks of woodlands and sorting the wood out for commercial use in Poland or for export. He told me with awe about Dad commanding hundreds of workers but never raising his voice. "I wonder where this good man is now. I wonder what is happening to my family?" Hershel lamented; his voice trailed off as he broke down.

* * *

Two weeks had gone by since we left home; it was Sunday, July 8. Mikhail sat in the kitchen reading newspapers, and we started talking about the war.

"I feel badly that the Germans overran your hometown," Mikhail said. He was worried that the Germans, according to his information, were behaving like brutes, murdering innocents, leaving wounded soldiers to die in the fields, and ignoring every law of civilized men.

Mikhail went on talking about the terrible setbacks of the Soviet army and the loss of all the territories in Poland and the Baltic states that the Soviets had liberated in 1939.

But he expressed confidence in the Soviet generals and the Party; he was sure the Soviets would prevail.

He opened a map in the newspaper outlining the movements of the German army. The map showed three major fronts of the war stretched along 1500 kilometers: the northern, central, and southern fronts. In the north their thrust was towards Leningrad, intended to cut the Soviets from the Baltic Sea. But the Baltic was of no critical use to the Soviets, Mikhail felt, at this time anyway since it was full of mines. He also felt that the German thrust in the middle, towards Moscow, would not achieve its objective. The Soviet government would probably evacuate all essential government, factories, and institutions before the German armies would get there, and a deserted Moscow would do no more good to Hitler than it did to Napoleon. The southern theatre of war was, in Mikhail's opinion, most crucial, since it threatened the Ukraine – the bread basket of the Soviet Union – and the oil riches near the Caspian Sea.

Mikhail further explained that the severe losses suffered by the Soviet army were a result of being unprepared for the surprise German onslaught. He also told me that heavy losses around Lvov were because many Ukrainian officers and some generals were hostile to Stalin and sympathetic to the Germans. Despite the setbacks, Mikhail thought that the Soviets had large reserves and that the Soviet army had begun to slow the German army down.

"I hope we'll be able to stop the Germans. If not in Kiev, then it'll be along the Don, and, if not there, then it will be in Stalingrad," Mikhail assured me.

I listened carefully and liked what I heard. Mikhail was soft spoken but convincing. One could tell that he had a lot of information and not just from newspapers.

Mikhail spent much of the afternoon walking with me through the streets and introducing me to his neighbors and Soviet history. He told me of the struggles that the Party had faced in the 1930s as the local rich farmers, *kulaks,* resisted the moves Stalin and the Party made to modernize the area. "Finally," he said, "we were forced to collectivize these rich farms to make sure they would produce enough to feed our people."

I asked Mikhail about anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. Mikhail assured me that there were only vestiges of anti-Semitism from the Czarist regimes. He explained that the Soviet Union had passed laws against anti-Semitism and racism of any kind. He pointed to himself, a Jew, as having full rights as any Soviet citizen and that he had not felt any discrimination because of being Jewish. He expressed his views that anti-Semitism in Russia before the revolution, and throughout Europe to this day, had always been instigated by the ruling class using Jews as scapegoats to divert attention from their failures. They had exploited the workers and the peasants, and then incited the poor and the oppressed to blame their misery on the Jews. "It is much easier to incite people to hate than to teach them to love," he concluded.

Mikhail spoke with so much conviction. Maybe he was right; maybe things were different here. And yet, I felt a bit uncomfortable: Mikhail sounded so much like the instructor of Leninism, a course we were obliged to take in high school. Was he genuine or was he repeating what the Communist Party propaganda machine had told its members? – I wondered. * *

The next day, Mikhail and Neena went to work, and Luba and I listened to the radio. The news was not good. The Germans were approaching Kiev. Paralyzing fright

gripped us all. From Kiev to Kirovograd was just a few hundred kilometers, and it would take no time for Hitler's tanks to move here. We discussed our fears with Mikhail and Neena later in the day when they returned home.

"Yes, the situation is not good," Mikhail said.

A few days later Neena approached us. "The Germans are, apparently, surrounding Kiev and some of their forces are moving east of Kiev, bypassing the city. Mikhail and I don't think you should stay here any longer. Frankly, we would leave as well, but we cannot. We are members of the Communist Party, and we both have responsible positions in this city. But you and Hershl have no business staying here."

"Where should we go?" Luba asked.

"We think you should go as far east as you can," Neena said. She then took Luba by the hand and led her to a sewing machine in the corner of the library. She opened the drawers around the machine, holding colorful pieces of material. "I will cut the material and give you half to take with you. I know you and Hershl have some money, but money will do you no good—you should be able to barter the material for bread and other necessities to survive."

The next morning Mikhail and Neena took us to the railroad station, helped us to obtain travel permits and bought us tickets to Voroshilovograd, a city some 500 kilometers from Kirovograd. Neena embraced Luba. They both burst into tears. "Have a safe trip and don't forget to write," Neena said. Luba, Hershl, and I boarded the train and left the station. I was sad and apprehensive. These people were so good to us, but now they were gone.

A day later we arrived at the Voroshilovograd station, and Hershl, Luba, and I disembarked. Luba was determined to find a teaching position. We went to see the director of education at City Hall.

The Director explained to Luba that it was summertime, and she might have to wait until September. However, he suggested that she go to a suburb of Voroshilovograd, which might need teachers; he volunteered to give her a letter of recommendation. We left and headed to the suburb a few kilometers away.

The suburb was a small farm town of a few thousand people. We found the mayor who helped us find a room with a middle-aged couple. He also found a job for Luba in the local factory, saying again that it was summertime, and they did not need teachers until the fall. The factory manufactured down jackets for the military. I soon found a job as a letter carrier. But Hershl couldn't find any work, most likely because he was deaf. Thus we settled in this strange new place.

Luba's job turned out to be demanding. The war imposed heavy quotas on the factory to produce large numbers of jackets in preparation for the winter.

Luba worked ten to twelve hours a day, and often the night shift. She was always rather fragile, and she now became pale and weak. I worried about her health. Our meager portion of black bread, less than a pound a day per person, and very rare ration of sugar, was all we had to live on, except for the occasional vegetables which the owners of the cottage would give us from the little plot of land surrounding the house.

Hershl would surreptitiously find "black markets" where he would barter some of the cloth Neena had given us for some fruit and vegetables. Those visits would do Hershl in. The NKVD would sometimes surround the illegal markets to seek out men of

military-conscription age, and haul them away. One day it happened--the NKVD picked up Hershl, along with a dozen other men, and drove them away in a military truck.

When Luba and I returned from work, we learned the terrible news from our landlord. We ran to the local police station, Luba shouting, "Where is our cousin? Where has he gone?" She explained that Hershl was completely deaf and would do the army no good. It was to no avail. Hershl was gone.

The news shocked me. I was angry that in this seemingly friendly country the police could snatch a completely deaf middle-aged man and haul him away as if he were cattle. And what could Luba and I do? The pain of parting from my parents was still raw and Hershl's disappearance exacerbated that pain.

We had become used to having Hershl with us. He was like my brother. More than that, in a way he was like my father, protecting us, often supplementing our meager rations. Now he was gone. What was going to happen to him? He was such a good man, so trusting; indeed, too trusting. Luba and I were now by ourselves.

My job as a letter carrier didn't last long. A teacher came back from vacation and volunteered to take over the letter carrying, so I was dismissed. Soon I found a job as bookkeeper of the local collective farm. I was introduced to the abacus, the only calculating machine on the farm (and probably in town). It was primitive, but I learned to be proficient at it, adding large columns of numbers without even looking. I did make good friends with the other workers in the office. Some foolish behavior nearly made me lose their friendship and also my freedom.

I used to bring my piece of bread for lunch in a small paper bag. I saw small bottles of milk left in the pantry, evening time just before I left the office. Some of that

milk would do wonders for Luba, I thought. Luba's pale face worried me; she needed something besides black bread and an occasional onion to live on. I brought an empty jar in my bag, filled it with a bit of milk from the other jars, and brought it to Luba.

Luba was suspicious. "Where did you get the milk from?"

"Zhenya gave it to me."

She knew that name from previous accounts of how nice Zhenya, a co-worker in the office, was to me. I was able to continue this lie for awhile. But one day Zhenya took me aside and warned me that the milk was set aside for the calves on the farm, and the people feeding the calves noticed they did not have enough milk. They believed that somebody must be stealing the milk, and they suspected me, so I better be careful, 'lest I be arrested. That put an end to my enriching Luba's diet.

Life was poor and primitive in the town. On Sundays, everybody went to the riverbank to wash their clothes. We hanged them out to dry in the sun. Occasionally someone would catch a fish, and all who gathered would celebrate the "feast" of having morsels of fresh fish grilled on a bonfire.

It was the end of August, and it was harvest time. In addition to working at the office, I volunteered to help on the collective farm, tying up bundles of wheat, digging potatoes, and doing other chores with dozens of other volunteers. The mood in the evening was particularly friendly and jovial. The Ukrainian young people were fond of singing, and sing they did. They harmonized beautiful Ukrainian and Russian songs, and I joined in with them until the early hours of the morning. We also gorged on potatoes roasted in bonfires spread over the field.

Despite the singing and the camaraderie, fear and foreboding began to fill the evenings and nights. We could hear distant rumblings, like earthquakes, the sound of war looming far away in the darkness of night. The darkness would also be occasionally interrupted by bright flares in the skies and bursts of exploding anti-aircraft missiles--another reminder that the front was getting closer and closer. My co-workers in the field were gleeful. "The Germans are coming, the Germans are coming, and maybe we'll be free at last!"

I was shocked. I understood that they had been torn away from their homes and their own farms and forced to work and live in a communal collective farm, and they hated it. But I knew better. I knew that Hitler's marauding armies would do them far more harm than Stalin had done. I was even more shocked when one young man started taunting me.

"You, Jew, are not so happy are you? You and your fellow Communists will probably be the first to be shot, ah? Maybe the best you can do is run away."

I didn't answer him. I knew it would not help to argue, it would only make my life more difficult. I was seething with anger. The cancer of anti-Semitism had worked its way through thousands of miles, far from Germany and Poland. Two months earlier in Kirovograd, Mikhail left me with the impression that anti-Semitism was gone in the Soviet Union. Now I had a new refresher lesson of being hurt as a Jew by a coworker. I knew that Luba's life and mine were in danger, and that we would soon have to flee again.

A few evenings later, I discussed my fears with Luba. Luba confirmed that she had heard in the factory of the Germans having taken over Kiev and moving eastward,

approaching Voroshilovograd. We decided to leave at daybreak before anyone could see us, since we didn't have travel permits.

Dawn came and we walked out holding onto our little valises. One of them was filled with the material that Neena had given us, the other one had our clothing and some food. Two hours later we were at the station and repeated the routine we had learned before. We waited until we saw a locomotive hitched to the wagons, and when it blew the whistle, we jumped on one of the cars. Off we went, heading east. The wagon we were on was an open car. The train ride seemed interminable.

Two days later we arrived in Kharkov. Another train joined ours. This train was loaded with heavy factory equipment being evacuated to Stalingrad. One of the cars also had evacuees from the Kharkov Technical Institute. They greeted us warmly and invited us into their covered wagon. They gave us denim jackets and other warm clothing and shared their food with us. The head of the department, a middle-aged engineer, took a particular liking to Luba. It was the braids, I thought. The next few days were pleasant, despite the cold and drizzly weather that came all too early this year, according to our new comrades. Evenings were filled with Russian songs, new songs, much more sophisticated than the ones I had heard in Voroshilovograd. Some of them referred to Jewish celebrations. Indeed, the department head, as well as most of the faculty, turned out to be Jewish.

In early September, we arrived in Stalingrad, and our new-found friends invited us to go to their assigned quarters, where the institute was to be relocated. We spent the night on cots in a large room. Towards dawn I heard Luba's voice, quiet but firm, "Leave me alone immediately."

Then the department head's voice, "I like you very much, Luba."

And her more forceful reply, "Get out of here!" I began coughing. "Get away, or I'll wake up everybody!" Luba repeated with determination. Things grew quiet. Apparently the department head complied. In the early morning, Luba turned to me and said, "Mekhel, let's go. With friends like these, who needs enemies?" We went off on our own.

Luba found her way again to the Education Department in the city and asked for work. After all, it was September, and schools were opening. She was assigned to go to Aksai, a small town seventy kilometers south of Stalingrad. We went back to the station and, with new permits in hand, we boarded the train to Aksai.

Chapter 4: Surviving, Just Barely, in Aksai - The Thief

Fear

How cold is a jail cell on a wintry night?
I was petrified, frozen with fright.
Cold, dingy and dark was the jail cell
where I landed, and it felt like hell.

The wind howled in though cracks in the wall.
Two men lay snoring on the dirt floor.
I wrapped in the urine-soaked blanket and groped
for a ray of morning, and whimpered and hoped…

Aksai was a small farm town of several thousand people. It was on the ancient crossroads of Slavs, Mongols, Turks, Georgians, Armenians, and other peoples from the Caucus mountain area between the Caspian and Black seas. The composition of the populace showed it--there were Slavs of northern origin, some people of Mongolian extraction, and others of darker skin from the Caucus. Most of the farming was done by Ukrainians, who had been uprooted as rich farmers (Kulaks) from their homes and farms and sent here to work in communal collective farms. These Ukrainian farmers were hostile to the regime and especially resentful of Jews, whom they considered to represent the Communists.

As we arrived, Luba was hired as a teacher of Russian in the local school, and I enrolled as an eleventh grader in that school. I also found a job, again as a part-time letter carrier. The school arranged for us to live with a family who owned a small cottage on the outskirts of town. We negotiated to have a small corner of a room with one bed and a chest. The price was half of Luba's salary (which was not very much), a portion of our

meager rations of bread and occasionally sugar and coal for the stove, which Luba was entitled to receive as a teacher. We also had the privilege of using the stove at off hours. We could occasionally boil potatoes or pieces of cabbage and onions. We soon discovered that a family we lived with was not very hospitable to us. They too had come from the Ukraine, were resentful of the regime and would interlace their conversation with anti-Semitic remarks. The woman of the house was irritable and would often criticize Luba for trivial matters or for no reason whatsoever. We persevered, for we had no choice.

October arrived and with it, according to the natives, the coldest weather since 1812, the year Napoleon had invaded Russia. Food became harder to get. Our initial rations of less than a pound of bread per person soon diminished to half a pound; the sugar and other "luxuries" stopped coming. The coal Luba was supposed to get never came. The little money that we had and even the material that Neena had given us were of no use. There was no food to buy or barter.

The news of the war continued to be frightening. Radio Moscow's bulletins were terse and fragmentary, but with the help of a map, Luba and I began to construct a picture of the situation. The Red Army continued its retreat on a broad front. In the central theater, the German armies had moved past Smolensk and were approaching Moscow. You could see worry on people's faces, in school and on the streets: Moscow might fall before long. In the south, German armies had overrun nearly all of the Ukraine and most of the Don Basin, rich in coal and other natural resources, and were approaching Kharkov.

In late November, our living conditions became unbearable. Snow storms and drifts made it impossible to go outside for days. Hunger ravaged our bodies. I would look at Luba, and my heart often sank; she had become emaciated. As she would manage to bring bread from school, I would carefully slice it so that she would get most of it, swearing that I had divided the portion equally.

Hunger made the owners of the hut more irritable and at times nasty. "Where is the sugar you promised us? Where is the coal you were supposed to give us?" The lady reproached Luba with anger. "You Jews are very smart. You're probably selling it to others, aren't you?" Soon enough she and her husband asked us to deliver on our promises or leave.

I was bewildered. Neither Luba nor I knew of any Jews in Aksai. Where did the owners of the hut learn that the Jews were out to cheat them? Where did their hostility towards the Jews come from? They knew of the shortage of food and coal in town; they knew that the school failed to supply teachers with promised necessities, but showed no understanding.

Luba went to the town hall and pleaded for a new place to stay. They arranged for us to move to another small cottage, where there were two families. The family that had been there the longest consisted of an older couple and a man in his thirties who was not mentally well. They, too, were evacuees and had lived in the cottage for months. The other residents were the Wieners, an older mother and a young son. The Wieners had come from Odessa and were in transit to go to Stalingrad. Norbert Wiener was a middle-aged man, rather short and slight, with a goatee and penetrating gray eyes. He was the

head of a tobacco factory, which was being evacuated from Odessa to Stalingrad. The Wieners became fond of Luba and helped us get settled.

A week after our arrival, the Wieners' son, Greesha, left for the army. We shared in their sorrows and worries. It bound us closer. Two weeks later the Wieners left for Stalingrad.

Meanwhile, the radio and newspapers brought encouraging news from the front. The Germans' *Panzer* divisions did come within 20 kilometers of Moscow but encountered stiff Soviet resistance. In early December, Soviet armies under Gen. Gregory Zhukov mounted a massive offensive against the German armies that had encircled Moscow. The Soviets routed the German armies, capturing many prisoners. On December 13th, *Pravda,* the official Soviet newspaper, boldly proclaimed the defeat and retreat of the German armies around Moscow. This was, in fact, the first major defeat of the Germans, and it gave new life and new hope to the Soviet Army and people. There was also good news from the southern front. The Soviets, under General Timoshenko, had driven the Germans out of Kharkov, pushing the Germans out of the eastern banks of the Don River.

At about the same time, in the morning of December 8th, Radio Moscow broadcasted news that Japan had attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Hawaii and that the U.S. had declared war on Japan. The news was followed with much fanfare and ecstatic joy on the radio, as well as in the press. All of a sudden, the United States, considered to be the strongest nation on earth, had become *de facto* an ally of the Soviet Union. The future looked brighter. Maybe this was the beginning of the end, I thought.

* * *

Two weeks after the Wieners' departure, the elderly couple in the cottage died from pneumonia, but most likely because of starvation. Luckily, the deceased couple left boxes of new clothing, galoshes, and cloth. They also left cartons of coal hidden in a corner. We began to use the coal sparingly on the cold winter nights. Luba took care of the young man, and he appreciated it. He gave Luba some material from which she ingeniously made warm jackets, which we used in the bitter cold.

I lost my job as a letter carrier; just as I had in Voroshilovograd--the job was too tempting and too conspicuous for native job seekers. I began to work after school in the local munitions factory, where the pay was skimpy and the work harsh. I was working on a lathe putting final touches on a metal part for a gun assemblage. We persevered.

Then, an event took place that nearly landed me in jail forever. The coal that the young man, now our landlord, had saved came to an end. The temperatures at night reached record lows, 30-40 degrees Fahrenheit below zero. First Luba, and then I, suffered frostbitten toes and fingers. Most of the fences and trees were disappearing around town as people took them down to burn and provide some relief from bitter cold.

One night I ventured outside and found loose planks on a nearby broken fence. I took them. We were ecstatic as we broke them into pieces and lit a fire in the stove. But they only lasted for a few days.

In desperation, I walked out the next night to search for more wood. I noticed a tree stump on our neighbor's property, lying next to a big pile of timber. I decided to take it, but it was too heavy for me to lift. I went back to the house and convinced the young man to go out with me and get that stump. It was rather heavy and awkward, but we managed to bring it in.

Half an hour later, there was a loud knocking on the door. I unlatched it, and a tall policeman stood in front of me. "Which one of you hauled in this stump?" he asked angrily.

Luba stepped forward. "I did!"

"Go ahead, lift it, young lady," the policeman commanded.

Luba, of course, was unable to budge the stump.

"You see, you shouldn't really mix into men's business," the policeman said with sarcasm. He took a good look at the young, retarded man; it was obvious that he was looking for a better victim. He turned to me angrily, "Did you do it?"

"Yes."

"Oh no, I helped him with it. It was all my idea," Luba protested.

"Then you come with me; you're both under arrest."

He took us away in a horse-drawn wagon waiting next to our cottage. A few minutes later he opened the police station door and ushered us in. Luba was sent to a room to the left. I was sent to the right through a narrow hallway to a small cell. A stench of urine and feces struck me so I could hardly breathe. A pail in the far right corner of the room was "the toilet." On the earthen floor, three men were stretched out close to one another. They shared one blanket. I was given a blanket and was shown to lie down in the other corner. I wrapped myself in the blanket, which smelled of urine, and I went to sleep.

Two or three hours later I was awakened and taken to a small, well-lit office and told to sit in front of a desk. A man came in, dressed in a down jacket. He was slim, wiry

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with dark gray hair and penetrating dark eyes. "Good evening," he said harshly. "Your name?"

"Mikhail Moysieyevicz Kesler," I replied.

"Where are you from?" The man continued questioning me.

I told him about my sister and me leaving home, traveling through the Ukraine and Stalingrad, and about our short stay in Aksai.

"How did you manage to survive since leaving home? Did your parents give you a lot of money?"

I explained politely the good fortune we had finding the family in Kirovograd, our sojourn in Voroshilovograd, and Luba's work as a teacher providing food and shelter for both of us. He continued questioning me for a long time, wanting to know if my sister and I had any connections with anybody in Poland or this country. Did I have any instructions or letters to give to anybody in this country? What other languages did I speak? Did I have any connections with Zionists? Then, unexpectedly, he fired at me, "How much wood did you steal?"

I tried to explain how cold we were and how, in despair, I had hauled in the stump of wood from the next property.

"Did you know it was government property?"

"No, I did not."

"Are you blind? Can't you read the sign? This is the town yard!" He yelled at me.

"I didn't know."

"How many times have you stolen wood from this property?"

"Just the time I told you."

"I have sworn testimony that you stole wood many times before."

I became defensive. I apologized. "Three nights earlier I did pick up two small planks from a fence on the other side of our hut."

"And what did you do before that? How did you survive the cold without a fire of some sort?"

"The person that we lived with had coal that his parents had saved for the winter. We burned that coal in the stove."

"Where are those parents you're talking about?"

"They died about a month ago."

"I think you're telling me a lot of lies! You've been stealing government wood, using it to burn in your own hut, and selling it to other people as well!" he shouted with anger.

"I didn't do any such thing, sir."

"Let's see how your story is a week from now or a month from now, as you and you sister rot away here." He closed the file and left the room.

A policeman took me back to my cell. I woke up in the morning, bleary eyed, to the shouts of my cellmates. "Breakfast is here! Breakfast is here!" The breakfast consisted of a slice of black bread and hot water. We relieved ourselves in the corner bucket. The bucket was taken out by an orderly and brought back an hour or two later.

I was distraught and full of fear. What was it that they were really asking me? I had told them everything I knew. What else were they looking for? And what was happening to Luba? Where was she now? The questions kept bombarding me like bees gone mad out of a beehive. Would we ever be released? What were they accusing me of?

A few months before, we had been required to read *Les Miserables* in school, and I had been completely immersed in it. Was I going to suffer the same fate as Jean Valjean? He ended up in forced labor on an island near France. Would I end up in a camp in Siberia? He stole a loaf of bread. I stole a stump of wood I was not even sure we could use. How do you make a fire out of a stump of wood if you don't have an axe or a saw?

I remembered the young man in Voroshilovograd remind me threateningly that I was a Jew and that the Germans would soon take good care of the likes of me. The lady where we stayed first in Aksai sent us out in the cold with the accusation, "You're Jewish so you must have sold your rations. You're very clever, aren't you?" Now this inquisitor. Was he trying to convict me because I was a Jew? Why did he ask me if I had Zionist connections?

The day wore on. Two of my cellmates were taken away, and I was left with the remaining one, obviously inebriated from too much alcohol. I wrapped myself in the dirty blanket to stop shivering and fell asleep. An elderly woman came in with some watery cabbage soup and a piece of black bread. The monotony of the day wore on. "Where is Luba? Where is Luba?" rang alarms in my mind. Why did she have to come forward saying she helped me bring in the wood? I wasn't sure that that would help me anyway.

Evening came and with it another watery portion of cabbage soup, and I fell asleep. It must have been long past midnight when an orderly shook me awake and took me to the room where I had been interrogated the night before.

The same officer was at it again. "So how did you arrange to steal so much wood?"

"I only took in one stump of wood," I replied.

"And what about the other planks that you admitted to stealing earlier?" he exclaimed victoriously.

"The other planks, sir, were from the fence on a different property."

"Look, you should know that we're talking about a lot of wood that has been stolen from government property. You better understand the seriousness of the charges and stop giving me false, childish answers. Whom have you been working with? Who are your friends here, and who are your sister's friends?"

"Sir, I don't have any friends in town or anywhere else," I said. I explained that my friends were behind German lines and I didn't even know whether they were alive. I told him that I was in school and also working long hours at the munitions factory and I had no time to make friends.

The officer began to shuffle his papers and was quiet for a while. Then he resumed his questioning. "Mikhail, your sister has confessed that you stole a lot of wood. Either she is lying, and she will pay for it dearly, or you are lying. Be sure of one thing, neither your sister nor you will leave this place until you tell us the whole truth. I want to know who your accomplices are. Who have you and your sister worked with to steal all that wood from government property?" He was shouting now.

"I'm telling the whole truth, and I don't believe that my sister confessed to anything else. She's not a liar, and she would not tell things that aren't true."

My answer enraged him, and he slapped me on the face with all his force; I was stunned. "You're accusing me of lying? Do you know what you're doing? You're offending a government official. Such an offense carries heavy punishment!"

"Sir, I don't mean to offend you, but I know my sister."

"Well, well, you're a stubborn young man, aren't you? We shall see what the truth is."

With that he left, and an orderly took me back to my cell. I was trembling with fear. I still didn't know what he wanted to get out of me. If I started inventing other stories, more to his liking, it would simply put me in bigger trouble, yet I knew for sure that Luba would not invent lies either, unless they tortured her or threatened to hurt me. I was paralyzed with worry.

The third day came and brought no relief and no hope. I began to walk around the cell like an animal that I had seen in a zoo in Ostrog. I was cold and hungry and out of my wits. Not a word from Luba or about Luba; no one to talk to except for the half-witted man. The stench of the bucket full of urine and waste filled my nostrils and penetrated my whole being. I began shouting, "Luba! Luba!" and then burst into tears. I felt helpless.

The third night came, and around midnight I was taken in again to face my inquisitor. "I have prepared a summary of my interviews with you. You can look through it quickly and sign it," he said.

I looked through it with sleepy, bleary eyes. There were pages of things that I had never said, among them a confession that I stole, on numerous occasions, large quantities of government property. I was shocked and puzzled.

"Sign it," he commanded, "and I'll let you go."

"But…" I began to protest.

"I don't want to hear any of your excuses. If you don't sign it now, you'll sign it tomorrow, or a week later, or a month later. Sign it and stop being foolish."

"Will you let my sister go?"

"Only if you sign," he answered. I felt I had no choice and I signed the document. In the morning I was released. I returned to our place and found Luba there crying. "I've worried about you so much," she said.

"What happened to you, Luba?" I asked, as I caressed her.

Luba told me she was released the next morning. The high school principal had noticed her absence and suspected she might have been arrested. He went to the police and, learning of her being in jail, he became angry and demanded her release. He told the police they had no reason to arrest anybody for getting wood to heat their huts in this cold weather. "Do you want my teachers to freeze to death?" he shouted, recounting the incident to Luba.

They released me, but they were really set on nailing you as the prime suspect," Luba concluded. "Now tell me what happened to you."

I told Luba about the interrogations in the middle of the night, the miserable conditions in the jail cell, the lies the officer made up about her confession, and the papers he made me sign.

"What did you sign, Mekhel?" she asked with alarm. I told her, and her face turned ashen. "That confession will probably land you in Siberia, all right, and I just hope I'll be able to join you." She burst into tears.

My trial was set for early March. The next two months were full of worry and fear. We began a desperate search for a lawyer to defend me. The crime I was accused of was more serious than I could imagine. The property next door was owned by a woman who was a member of the Communist Party. She filed an affidavit attached to my case

stating that she was missing two truckloads of wood, telephone poles, wood for bridges and other strategic uses. I was the prime suspect of stealing the property.

* * *

In early February, a veterinary school had evacuated from Moscow to Aksai and they were giving courses in the evening to train veterinary assistants. I immediately gave up my work at the munitions factory and enrolled in that course. Meanwhile, we both became immersed in the upcoming trial. It appeared impossible to find a lawyer who would defend the case. No local attorney would touch the case, and for good reason: Aksai had a judge who was prone to hand out severe sentences. We had no money to consider a lawyer from another town. Our contacts with local attorneys made me appreciate the seriousness of the case. Stealing government property, no matter what quantity or kind, was severely punished in the Soviet Union. My confession had compounded the crime, and I feared that I would be sentenced to spend years in Siberia.

Two weeks before the trial, a few rays of hope broke through. A major criminal case was to be tried in Aksai, and a prominent Jewish lawyer from Stalingrad arrived in town to prepare the defense. Luba managed to see the lawyer and plead that he take my case. Her good looks (and braids) and convincing way with people made the difference; the lawyer agreed to defend me without pay.

Early in March, Luba and I and the "angel" lawyer walked into the small courthouse. We soon learned that the chief prosecutor was away in Stalingrad on other business.

"This is the best break we could have," Luba whispered to me. "The chief prosecutor is a real anti-Semite, and I feared him more than the devil."

Indeed, the assistant prosecutor, a young, mild-mannered man, was presenting the case. Presiding at the dais were two middle-aged women and one man, not the severe judge of Aksai. Luba spotted my teacher from the high school, and Luba's friend, who came apparently to testify on my behalf.

The young prosecutor presented my case. He demanded the court pass a severe sentence to discourage stealing of government property, particularly by guests of this country. Then he called our neighbor, the woman who had filed the affidavit, to testify about the enormity of my crime. According to her report, she was missing two truck loads of valuable wood, some of it destined as building materials for the front, and I was the admitted thief.

Then it was the defense's turn. First, my lawyer called to the witness stand the high school teacher. She testified that I was the best student in the eleventh grade, probably the best student in the high school, that I was a model for other students working hard under severe conditions to excel in every subject that I was taking. I was a quiet young man and got along well with my fellow students. She also volunteered that as a teacher she was supposed to get coal for the winter, but she had never received any. Then she turned to the judges and suggested that Aksai looked eerie with absolutely no fences left. People were forced to use that wood to survive the cold.

The next witness was the principal of the school; his presence startled Luba and me. He confirmed that the school was supposed to give coal to its teachers, but that there was no coal available. Luba, the sister of the accused, was certainly entitled to have coal to keep from freezing in this terrible winter, and he could understand how desperate her brother was to provide some means of warming up their place.

Then my lawyer turned to the woman who had filed the affidavit and asked who made up her inventory of the wood delivered, goods sold, and goods remaining in the yard.

"I did," she replied.

"Did you have anybody else help you in this effort?" my lawyer continued.

"No, I did it by myself."

It was time for closing testimony. My lawyer appealed especially to the two women, who had sat quietly during the trial, one of them wiping tears off her face during the teacher's testimony about me.

"Honored judges! These two young people fled their homes ahead of the Germans and miraculously survived their long ordeal of coming here to Aksai, to live among you. The young man is an exemplary student, who works afternoons to learn a new vocation. His sister is teaching your children. These wonderful young people want to live and do well for themselves and for the community. The community owed them minimum means to survive the winter, a minimum of food, some shelter, and the very minimum of wood or coal to prevent them from freezing. The community has failed them. The young man ran out at night, in desperation, to fetch a piece of wood so as to keep his sister and himself from being frozen to death. The story of this young man stealing two truckloads of wood has been made up to cover somebody else's crimes. This young man and his sister have suffered enough the last two months, first being in jail and then in fear of being convicted. It is time to exonerate the young man."

The court was dismissed. Luba and I ran over to the lawyer and thanked him profusely.

"You didn't call on me, sir," I said sheepishly to the lawyer.

"My young man, you should count your blessings that I didn't. If I had called on you, I would have been forced to prove that your confession was false and coerced by the police. We may have made a better impression on the judges, but I'm not sure you would have been able to leave Aksai ever. The police don't like to let others know about their ways of getting confessions."

The decision of the court arrived two days later. I was given six months' probation. Luba and I could breathe with ease again.

* * *

Spring arrived and with it somewhat larger rations of bread and shorter queues to get other necessities. My work in school was easy, and I began to devote much more time to my veterinary courses.

The anatomy lectures and courses of the various diseases of the local animal population were supplemented with visits to farms, inspection of animals, and interviews with the farmers. Once, we helped a cow deliver a calf. It was extremely difficult to get that calf out, but it was fascinating to see how the mother kept licking the calf and showing affection towards it.

At the end of June, I completed the veterinary course and the eleventh grade of high school. It was vacation time from high school, but my veterinary training continued.

The Veterinary Institute sent me to a farm a few kilometers from Aksai to do my internship. I was assigned to a man who was a veterinary assistant as well, but with many years of experience. He became my mentor. We went from farm to farm inspecting cattle

to make sure there was no sign of any infectious disease. We also attended to any day-to-day problems, such as injuries or health problems farmers would tell us about.

I was given a horse and got my first experience in long hours of horseback riding. It was fun, but also quite painful for the back and the rear.

The collective farm gave me a small room with a little wooden stove and a couple of pots. Potatoes and cabbage were easy to get and became much of my staple diet. On some Sundays, I would visit Luba in Aksai.

One Sunday she told me she had spent the preceding week visiting the Wieners in Stalingrad. She told me they lived in a spacious apartment, waiting for personnel and equipment from the tobacco factory he headed in Odessa to arrive and be transported across the Volga. Then she told me of an incident that made me worry about her. Wiener had stored a lot of tobacco, stolen from the factory, in his apartment. In Stalingrad, tobacco was a rare commodity and was worth a lot of money. Wiener told Luba that one of the workers had betrayed him, and he feared the NKVD would search his apartment. If they found the tobacco, he would surely be sent to Siberia. Luba offered to help him. She wrapped herself with a lot of tobacco leaves, tied them with a rope, put on an old raincoat of Mrs. Wiener and surreptitiously left the building. Later in the day, Mr. Wiener met her in an abandoned warehouse and he took back the tobacco, full of thankfulness to Luba.

"Luba, Luba, how did you dare do such a thing?" I shouted. "You could have been apprehended by the NKVD as you left the building, and you would have suffered the same fate as Mr. Wiener. How can you jeopardize your life like that? Luba embraced me.

"Hush, don't worry so much, I'll be okay," she assured me.

Luba continued her account of the visit. While in Stalingrad, she learned that a school in telecommunications, evacuated from Leningrad, would be moving to Tashkent. They were looking for students to sign up. Luba registered to study in that school. As a student, she would be free to go to Tashkent. "If you behave, I'm going to take you with me," she burst out laughing.

Meanwhile, the news from the ubiquitous Radio Moscow, as well as from the latest *Pravda* Luba had brought with her from Stalingrad, was not good. The Germans did pull their forces from Moscow but moved them to the southern front. Refreshed with new supplies of personnel and arms, the Germans began an ominous thrust towards Stalingrad. They had overrun the Crimea and Sevastopol, crossed the Don River, conquered Kharkov, and were approaching Rostov. The Russian armies were in disarray, retreating on a broad front.

The thumping, thunderous volleys of artillery, as well as bright flares of anti-aircraft volleys, awakened me. The fear of impending disaster overshadowed everything else I was doing. It seemed as if the new German offensive was inflicting on the Russians the same disasters as in the first weeks of the war.

A few days after the conversation with Luba, in early August, I saw her in the distance as I was riding my horse. Yes, it was she. I recognized her silhouette and braids swaying to and fro as she was walking along the dirt road. I commanded my horse to trot, and I was soon with her. She carried a heavy bundle and looked quite tired and worried. I got off my horse and embraced her.

"Mekhel, we must leave immediately," Luba said. "The Germans are approaching Stalingrad and tightening a noose around the city. I have all of our possessions in this sack, but there's much to do before we can leave. Let's go to your place."

I took the bundle from Luba in one hand and the horse's reins in the other. Luba walked beside me. She reminded me that I was still under probation and was obliged to stay here. She had learned that the head of the local garrison had his headquarters nearby. She decided to visit him and beg him to give me a permit to leave. I was startled, but I had come to trust Luba's judgment.

Luba wanted me to take Dad's watch with me, and we took off to see the colonel. As we approached the shack, Luba asked me to give her the golden chain of the Longines watch and she went inside. A short while later she came out. She was beaming. "I've got your permit, Mekhel. Now let's go back to your shack." I took my horse to the farm center and explained to the assistant chieftain that I was leaving. I showed him my permit. He looked at it carefully, then shook my hand and wished me good luck. I went back to my shack, picked up my few belongings, and Luba and I left.

We walked as fast as we could towards the Aksai train station. I turned to Luba and asked how she was able to convince the colonel to give her the permit. "It wasn't easy," Luba said, as she recounted what had happened. She described to the colonel our situation and that she feared we would be killed, as Jews, if the Germans conquer Aksai. She showed her admission to the Telecommunications Institute, being relocated from Leningrad to Tashkent. She asked him to issue a permit to enable me to join her. He hesitated to do that, but Luba put on his desk the golden watch chain and addressed him:

"Tovarishch Colonel, I know I'm asking a lot of you, but this is a matter of life or death for me and particularly my brother. My father gave us this golden chain before we parted from our home. I would be delighted if you'd accept this little gift from us." The colonel took the chain and wrote the permit.

Soon we were at the train station. A single train with a locomotive attached to it was there. We knew our routine well. We waited until the locomotive blew a shrieking whistle and then jumped onto the caboose of the train.

Then Luba asked me for the watch. She opened her bundle and found a long string. She took the watch, tied the string around the hook of the watch and secured the other end of the string through the buttonhole of my shirt pocket. "I think the watch will be safer now," she said.

A few hours later, almost at dusk, the train pulled into the Stalingrad railroad yard filled with trains and commotion. We jumped off the caboose and ran across the tracks past the parked trains to the railroad station.

Chapter 5: Fleeing Stalingrad – The Watch

Volga, Volga Russian River
Volga, Volga Mother Dear
Accept a gift from your humble givers
A Don Cossack and his peers.
(A Russian folksong)

The Stalingrad train station was filled with men, women, and children seeking escape. You could see the panic in their eyes and the fear on their faces. A wave of despair spread through the huge hall as the P.A. system announced, "No more trains to the South." I looked at Luba in disbelief.

"So our train from Aksai must have been the last one, wasn't it?"

She agreed. "It's a long way to the Wieners; we must hurry before it gets dark."

We left the station. The streets were filled with military traffic, and there were soldiers on each corner. We could sense an air of crisis gripping the city. People were in a hurry to get wherever they were heading. Long queues were forming at each place handing out rations. Finally we reached the apartment house where the Wieners were staying and the doorman let us in.

Luba knocked on the door. Mrs. Wiener opened it and shouted in disbelief, "Norbert! Look who's here!"

She embraced Luba as if she were her own daughter. I could see she was very fond of Luba. Mr. Wiener came over, hugged Luba, shook my hand, and led us to the living room.

"Sit down, rest a bit," Mrs. Wiener said. "Let me bring in Mother. She'd love to see you."

Mrs. Wiener went out and came back with the old woman. "Mother, you remember Luba and Meesha from Aksai?"

The woman embraced Luba and exclaimed in Yiddish, "*Oi, Kinderlech, tayere Kinderlech, es iz azoy shayn vos eer zeynt do*!"(Oh, children, it is wonderful to see you.) She sat down and joined in the conversation.

Luba recounted our escape from Aksai, how she orchestrated getting the permit from the garrison commander for me to travel to Tashkent, and how we managed to get on the last train leaving Aksai for Stalingrad. "Have you heard anything from Greesha?" Luba asked.

"Not a word from our son," Mr. Wiener answered with a sigh. He told us he was worried, that he didn't know where he was, or whether he was even alive. "This latest German offensive is so vicious; we've lost so many people. Who knows? We console ourselves by blaming our mail system that has collapsed with the war," he said, then asked about Hershl.

I was surprised that he remembered our loss of our Hershl, in Voroshilovograd; Luba must have told him when she visited them a few weeks earlier. Luba had told Mr. Wiener that she had inquired with various military units of his whereabouts, but had received no reply.

Mrs. Wiener returned, and asked us to wash up and come to the dining room. "Let's sit down and eat, and, by the way, take your belongings and put them in this bedroom. You'll be staying with us, won't you?"

We thanked her profusely. The Wieners had a spacious apartment with three bedrooms in addition to the living and dining rooms. Mr. Wiener was obviously treated well, as the head of the tobacco enterprise, even as an evacuee.

We sat down at the dinner table and resumed the conversation. Mr. Wiener expressed concern about the situation in the city. He explained that Hitler was determined to take Stalingrad, to secure the Caspian Sea oil and the fertile Ukraine.

"He has amassed, amazingly, several million soldiers, partly from his vassals. He has enormous mechanized power and an air force that is far superior to ours. He has some pretty damn good generals leading this new offensive as well, and the Germans seem to be encircling Stalingrad," he said.

"What do you think we should do?" Luba asked.

"I believe you should leave the city as soon as you can," Mr. Wiener replied. "I wish Zhenya, our mother, and I could leave. But I have to stay with the factory until I'm told to go, and I don't know if and when this will happen."

We retired to our bedroom. As the night wore on, the terror of war came upon us. The roar of artillery shells, aircraft bombardment, anti-aircraft fire bursting in the air, and sirens of the emergency vehicles continued without interruption. Flares lit up the sky as if it were broad daylight. It was exciting, but it also filled me with fright. It appeared that our whole world was in flames all around and would soon consume the Wieners, Luba and me.

Morning came, and we all sat down in the kitchen for breakfast. Mr. Wiener looked more distracted and nervous than he had the evening before. "I just listened to the news, and I'm very concerned for you," he said as he turned to us. "I hear there is a ship,

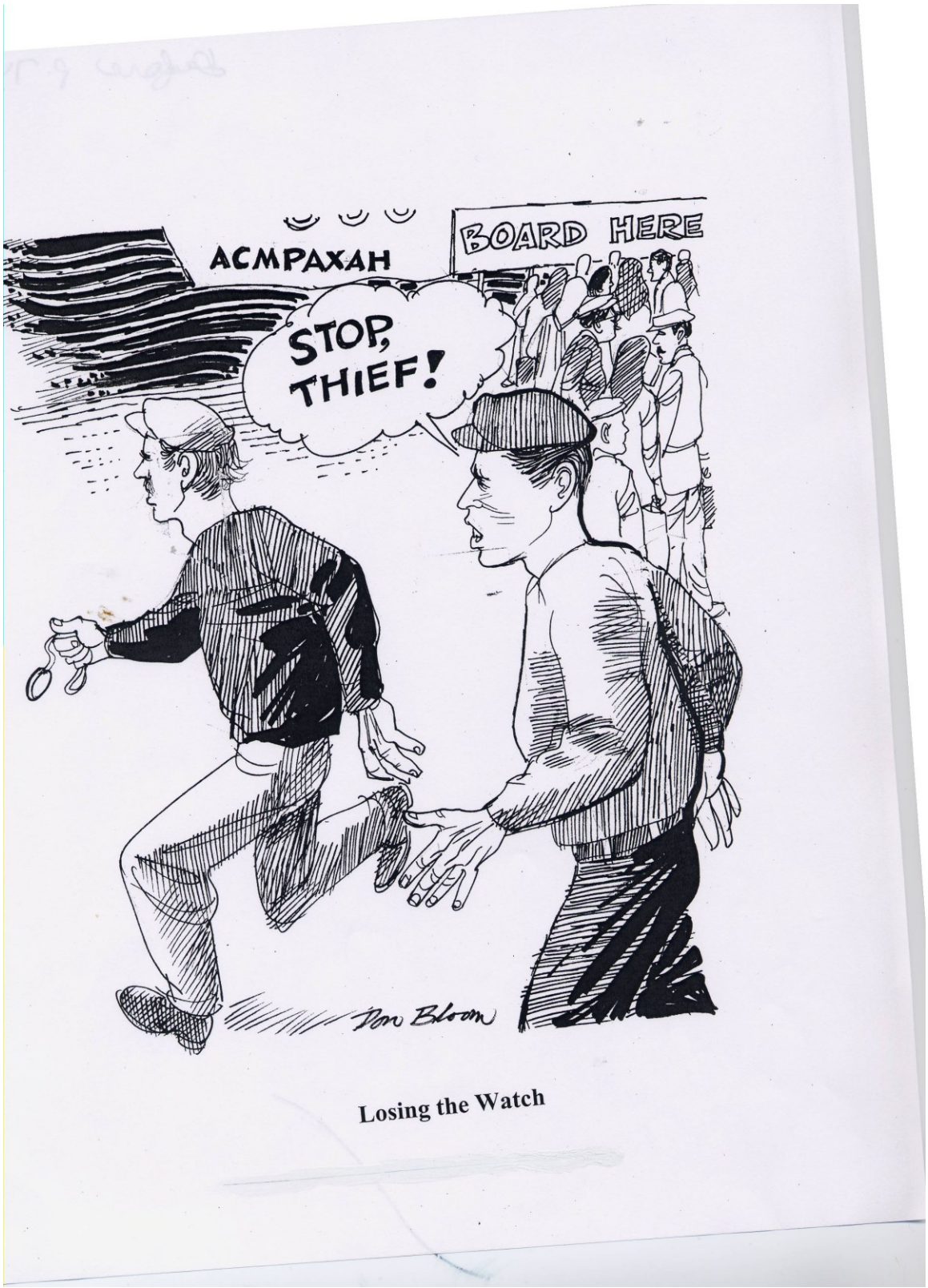
named *Astrakhan* that will be leaving from the docks and going down the Volga River towards the Caspian Sea. I really think you should try to get on that ship. I believe one of you should stand in line and try to get the tickets," he said. He got up and embraced Luba, bid me good luck, said goodbye to Zhenya and her mother, and left.

I went out and found a long queue of people waiting to get tickets for the *Astrakhan*. I joined the queue, as more and more people filled the narrow street leading to the docks. The line moved more slowly than I had hoped. Hours went by. The late July sun was hot and dizzying. I felt as if I were being carried along by the surging crowd. I leaned against the arms of a tall man. I was sweaty, thirsty, and felt tired. I closed my eyes just for a moment, to relax, and dozed off. Suddenly, I felt a violent jerk and the tearing of my shirt pocket. I opened my eyes and saw a lean, short teenager running away. I reached for my Longines watch. It was gone. I jumped out of the queue and began chasing the teenager, but he was fast, much faster than I. He melted into the crowd, and I couldn't find him.

I was in despair! This was the most important possession Luba and I had. The watch was the last thing Dad had given me when we parted. "Take good care of this watch, Mekhel. It may save your life one day," Dad's last words rang in my ears. Now I had lost it. I was disappointed with myself.

There was no use rejoining the queue; policemen blocked the way so additional people could not enter. Slowly, sadly, I returned to the Wieners.

Luba was waiting for me. She looked at me and knew something was wrong. I explained what happened; she was livid. "How could you do such a thing? Why didn't you rejoin the queue right away? Who knows whether we'll have another chance to cross



Losing the Watch

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Don Bloom, E. Brunswick, N.J.

the Volga? The radio just announced an order from Stalin that no one will be allowed to leave Stalingrad. He wants everybody to defend the city."

She was angry and so disappointed with me. I felt sorry for myself, as well as for Luba. The day wore on. Mrs. Wiener consoled me. "Don't worry. There will probably be another ship tomorrow, and you'll be able to buy tickets to leave."

In the evening, Mr. Wiener heard what had happened to my watch and suggested we wait until he gets his permit and join him and his family when they leave Stalingrad.

The next morning Luba went downstairs to fetch a few things for Mrs. Wiener. She came back with the local newspaper. Huge headlines on the first page brought stunning news: The *Astrakhan* Hit a Mine, and 300 Perished.

"Sorry, Mekhel, I should not have yelled at you yesterday," Luba said, embracing me with tears in her eyes. We were safe again. But I was shaken. Chills went through my body, as I remembered Dad handing over the watch to me with trembling hands. Yes, it was a miracle that I lost my place in the queue chasing after the kid who stole my watch, or was it predestined? Was Dad watching over us, I thought with bewilderment?

We stayed with the Wieners another week. The city took on an eerie feeling. At night, all lights had to be turned off, and the streets were dark and vacant. New ordinances urged people to avoid any unnecessary travel to conserve fuel, to store food, and to secure shelters. People from the entire neighborhood were mobilized to dig ditches in the middle of wide streets, and to install old, heavy equipment—such as abandoned trucks, carriages, and metal equipment of all sorts for anti-tank defense.

The nights were filled with the din of artillery bombardment, aircraft roar, and bomb explosions. Flares lit up the sky and anti-aircraft shells traversed the sky like

lightning. At times, the sky turned red from raging fires. I felt as if the fires were spreading to engulf us. Memories of the fright and anxiety of the day I left home gripped and choked me.

Luba and the Wieners looked somber and worried, too. The news on the radio or in the local newspapers was not too revealing. But word of mouth, like electricity in a wire, traveled fast. It was becoming clear that the Germans were tightening their grip on the city, day by day. Rumors spread towards the end of our stay that fighting had erupted in the outskirts of Stalingrad.

One evening, Mr. Wiener came home and announced we would be leaving town by horse and wagon to board a small boat to cross the Volga. Zhenya had already been prepared for it. In a couple of hours we were ready. We left the apartment building one by one and met at a corner a few blocks away where a horse drawn carriage was waiting. We boarded it and half an hour later we were at the bank of the river. We disembarked. Shortly thereafter a small boat arrived, and we descended into its hull. "We must be quiet, and we must be lucky. This is a dangerous trip," Mr. Wiener whispered. Two oarsmen propelled the boat away from the shore, onto the river. I was disturbed and frightened. I wondered how the oarsmen knew to avoid mines of the kind that blew up the *Astrakhan*. Two hours later, we reached the eastern bank of the mighty Volga, seven or eight kilometers away. Mr. Wiener paid the captain a handsome sum of money, and we left the boat. Mr. Wiener arranged for safe passage on dry land as well. We stayed in a small hut, and in the morning we boarded a train heading east.

Crossing the Volga – at Last

We traveled in a comfortable passenger car, and we had a modest supply of food. And we were safe. I felt as if I had been released from a hermetically sealed vessel under enormous pressure. I was relieved; I was free!

Yet, slowly the events of the last two weeks began jabbing at my brain. The miraculous irony of losing the watch, and my place in the queue to board the *Astrakhan* filled me with awe. I imagined with horror hitting a mine on the trip towards the Caspian, perishing in the rough waters of the Volga, but for the loss of the watch! And what if the secretive boat ride arranged by Mr. Wiener would have hit a mine? I shuddered, waving off the thought as if it were a wild beast.

The days turned monotonous as the train moved slowly, often stopping to let trains with military supplies and soldiers pass by heading west. We traveled through endless views of nothingness—no visible sign of life for hours on end. Occasionally, we would stop at small stations where local women with dark, long hair and Mongolian facial features greeted us, carrying flatbreads, fruit, and drinks.

One day Mr. Wiener motioned me to his compartment and closed the door.

"Sit down, Meesha," he said. "Luba told me of your terrible experience in Aksai. You feared you'd be sent away to Siberia. Join the crowd!" He burst out laughing. "I too have feared many times of being sent away. So have many millions in the Soviet Union. How else can one feed a family? How else can one survive here?"

He went on to tell me of the harsh life in the Soviet Union. The salary one received was inadequate to survive and one had to devise all sorts of schemes to feed the family, often putting oneself in danger of being apprehended by the secret police. Most

business was conducted by barter, under the table. These conditions had prevailed even in peace time.

He asked about my life in Poland. I told him that our biggest problem in my hometown was anti-Semitism, and described to him the pogroms that we had and constant fear of being assaulted by gentile kids. "Anti-Semitism has no boundaries and no dateline," he said. "We have written in our passports that we are Hebrew, Jewish, but we can hardly practice our religion or culture," He continued to tell me of Soviet fake trials of the best of Jewish writers and poets, in the mid-30s, and of their executions for crimes they had never committed. He scoffed at a Jewish "state" Stalin set up for the Jews, called Birbijan. The state was in Eastern Siberia, more than 10,000 kilometers away from where most of the Jews lived in Russia.

Mr. Wiener wanted to know about the life of workers in Poland. I described life in our small town and mentioned frequent strikes by workers in big factories. Mr. Wiener became animated. "You see, Meesha, we call our system Dictatorship of the Proletariat. However, our workers do not have the right to strike, regardless of how poorly they're paid or treated. On paper, they're all free, but it's the freedom of puppets to dance in tune with those who pull the strings, members of the Communist Party. And the Party is full of incompetent, corrupt people."

He was flushed with excitement; I saw beads of sweat run down his face. He was uncomfortable, as if regretting all he had said.

I was shocked to hear all that. The last time I heard impromptu views about the country was with Mikhail Alexandrovich in Kirovograd. He was so much more enthusiastic about the Soviet system. Of course, he was a member of the Communist

Party, while Wiener was not. But Wiener's views resonated much more true with me, particularly since my experience in Aksai. I was saddened.

* * *

Three weeks went by since we had left Stalingrad. The train stopped at a key station. One track led south towards Uzbekistan, the other straight to Chkalov in Southern Siberia. Mr. Wiener's factory was being evacuated to Chkalov. Luba had enrolled as a student in the Leningrad Telecommunications Institute, which was being evacuated to Tashkent, and I held a permit to go to Tashkent. Sadly, it was time to part with the Wieners. Luba and I knew, days in advance this would happen. I did not know how it would hurt. When I woke up one early September morning, mindful we would be parting with the Wieners, I felt numb and sad. So many partings, so many losses. Does another loss, does another separation from good people, matter anymore? I was stoic as Zhenya and Sarah embraced me with wet cheeks. Luba was choking with tears, too. Mr. Wiener gave me a handful of rubles.

"I know this money may not be worth much, but who knows," he said as he shook my hand.

The Wieners' wagon separated from the train we had been on, and another locomotive came to fetch them. We moved to an empty wagon of the train to complete our journey. A few days later we arrived in Tashkent.

The Tashkent railroad station overflowed with people, poly-glottal and poly-garbed. Most of the people were refugees, holding on to their meager bundles. Many of them looked Jewish. But there was a great mixture of people with slanted dark eyes, straight dark hair, and facial expressions reminding me of Mongolian tribes I saw in my

history books. They were in long, striped, multi-colored robes. Some wore elaborate head gear, and spoke a language I could not understand. We left the station and headed towards City Hall.

We arrived at City Hall after it was closed. The park across the street was filled with people, refugees just like us. We rested our bundles on a grass plot. Evening descended and we went to sleep. A sudden jerk of my bundle woke me. Two teenagers were grabbing my bundle, ready to run away. I had a flashback of the teenager who stole my watch while I was in the queue for a permit to cross the Volga in Stalingrad. This time I was faster than they were. I slugged one of them with all the force I could muster, grabbed my bundle, and started kicking the other teenager. Other people came to my rescue. I came back to Luba, who was holding onto her bundle crying out for help.

In the morning, Luba enrolled as a student at the Telecommunications Institute. Now it was time to find a place to stay; the Institute did not provide housing. We went to the market place to meet people and ask for advice. As we were mulling in the market somebody pulled Luba's braid.

"Neena!" Luba cried as she embraced our angel lady from Kirovograd.

"What a miracle it is to find you here," Neena exclaimed.

Neena stood there, grayer and a bit more stooped than I remembered her of a year earlier. She told us she and her husband were living in an apartment nearby. Luba explained our situation, and Neena instantly volunteered, "Luba and Meesha, you come with me; you'll stay with us." She said it with such sincerity that we could not refuse.

We walked with Neena to a tall building and went up three flights of stairs. Neena opened the door of an apartment at the end of a long, narrow hallway. In the

kitchen was Mikhail Alexandrovich. He looked considerably older, with gray hair invading his head and beard. He was also much more subdued and sad than when I had seen him a year earlier.

"Let me take you through the grand living quarters," Neena said sarcastically, as she took me and Luba by the hand.

Their apartment was tiny and consisted of one small bedroom, a living room - more like a hallway - a kitchenette and bathroom. Neena pointed to the living room.

"This will be your palatial suite," she said with a smile.

We put our bundles on the small couch and went back to the kitchenette. The Kaganoviches left Kirovograd a few weeks after we had left, then lived in Kharkov for a while with relatives until forced to flee a few months ago. They came to Tashkent two months ago and were still looking for employment.

"Have you heard from Leonid?" I asked.

"Not a word," Neena answered. "We haven't gotten any letters since the day you brought us his letter from Kiev, and we don't know whether he is even alive," she explained. "We have written so many letters to various military officers, but we never get an answer. It's very difficult. And where is Hershl?" she asked. Luba explained how Hershl disappeared in Voroshilovograd and how we lost touch with him.

The news of the disappearance of Leonid, like the news I had heard earlier of the disappearance of the Wieners' son, Greesha, struck me with horror. I couldn't understand how people, especially young people serving their country in the armed forces, would disappear without any letters from them, or notices about them, to their

families. Sure, a war was going on, but was not such a time especially important to let families know where their sons were?

Neena prepared a meal, mostly of local vegetables. We chatted a long time. I reminded Mikhail he had predicted the Germans' onslaught on Stalingrad when we were in Kirovograd. I also teased him that he was certain at that time the Soviets would repulse the Germans. He was much gloomier now.

He had been more optimistic towards the end of last year, when Zhukov repulsed the Germans near Moscow, Mikhail explained. Since then, Zhukov had been confined to the Moscow area. Stavka, the political arm of the Defense Department under Stalin, had been in command of the fighting, and hadn't done so well. A number of offenses by the Red Army during the winter months, along the 1500-kilometer front, had led to great losses. Meanwhile, the Germans began in the spring a major offensive in the south and were able to advance to Stalingrad. Still, Mikhail felt that the Soviets had built up tremendous reserves in the hinterland. He still believed that the Soviet Union would prevail. He was particularly enthusiastic about Zhukov's promotion to Deputy Supreme Commander, next in rank to Stalin. He expressed hope that Zhukov would be as brilliant in defending Stalingrad as he had been near Moscow.

We were overwhelmed with the kindness of our rediscovered friends. Good fortune was with us again. Would it last?

The kindness of the Kaganoviches was extraordinary, but it did not answer our needs. Luba and I didn't feel it was fair to impose on them, since they were struggling to survive as well. Yet the small stipend the Institute was promising Luba was not sufficient

for us to find another apartment or, indeed, to support us. Furthermore, Tashkent had no positions for veterinary assistants. Would my training be wasted?

Hunger pervaded the city, and food was becoming scarcer. I would wake up early, before dawn, to join long queues to get our meager portion of bread, but the bakery would often run out of bread and I would go back empty handed. Zhenya and Mikhail heard rumors that an epidemic of typhoid fever had invaded the city. The city had become a dangerous place for homeless strangers. The countryside, they told us, would make it easier to find food and a place to live.

I found the Veterinary Affairs Department of Uzbekistan and made an appointment. I bought a new shirt for the occasion. I was let in to see the director of the department. He was in his 40s, much taller than I. He was Uzbek but spoke Russian fluently. He asked me to sit down while he was reviewing my papers.

He asked about my schooling in Aksai. I told him the courses we took, the experience we had on the neighboring farms, and the internship I had just begun before my sister and I had to flee.

"Do you know Uzbekian?" the Director asked. "You know you'll be here among Uzbek people who do not know Russian?"

I told him I had to learn many languages, since the country I came from had been overrun by several neighboring nations, and we had to become multilingual, even as children. He wanted to know more about it.

I briefly told him the history of the part of Poland where we had lived, which was actually the Ukraine: its takeover by the Austrians at the end of the eighteenth century,

and then by Russia a few decades later, its allocation to Poland under the Versailles Treaty of 1919, and its takeover by the Soviets in 1939. He listened intently.

"I see you are a bright young man and I trust you will apply yourself well to your work." He proceeded to tell me there was an opening for a veterinary assistant to serve a few farms surrounding Sir Daria, a village about 100 kilometers southwest of Tashkent. The veterinary services in that area were headed by a very good man whom, he thought, I would like to work for. "If you're interested, I will write a note to him about you. Just wait in the hall until I write the letter."

He got up, shook my hand, and bid me goodbye.

I went back to the apartment and showed Luba the letter. I was elated. Next day Luba went to the Education Department and got a letter of recommendation to the Sir Daria High School principal. In the evening, we told the Kaganoviches of our decision to leave Tashkent.

The next morning we bid goodbye to Neena and Mikhail. I was choking as I embraced Neena, and I saw tears in her eyes as well.

"Don't forget," she said, "if things don't go well for you in Sir Daria, consider our abode. Wherever we are is your home."

"Yes, you are part of our family," said Mikhail.

Luba and I left. I was distraught; another parting; another goodbye. Would we see them again? I felt a nagging pain. So many losses; parents, home, Hershl, the Kaganoviches in Kirovograd, the Wieners, and now the Kaganoviches again. Yes, Luba was with me, yet I felt so lonely and so fearful. Shortly, we caught a train to Sir Daria.

Chapter 6: Living Among Uzbeks -

The Veterinary Assistant

Hospitality

I lived among Uzbek, Mongol tribes,
I shared their sorrows as well as feasts.
They were simple, yet kind. They saved my life
as I sought refuge from the cultured Huns turned beast.

A drizzly day in October greeted us at the small railroad station. We took our belongings, entered the small brick building, and asked the guard for directions to the center of town. The center of Sir Daria was a kilometer away. The dirt road was lined with white, round huts with thatched roofs, reminding me of the pictures of huts from the *Baba Yaga* stories of my childhood. Each hut had a plot of land in the back filled with stalks of corn and other vegetables.

In the town hall building, the chief administrator, sitting at a desk, greeted us. We presented our letters of recommendations from the state. The man was duly impressed. He spoke Russian well, but I could detect a Ukrainian accent. He must have been relocated from the Ukraine and sent here, I thought. He gave us written notes to present to our would-be employers: the high school, where Luba was to teach Russian and Russian history, and the veterinary doctor in town with whom I was to work. He also suggested we see a woman named Olga, who might have a place to rent. We thanked him, then left the town hall. Sir Daria looked promising.

We went to see Olga first. She was an attractive woman in her 50s, blonde with lively blue eyes and an easy smile. She detected our Polish accents, and told us she had

arrived here in the early 1930s with her husband, a wealthy Ukrainian farmer, who had since died in an accident on the collective farm. She was eager to rent us a place downstairs next to her own apartment. She also had another tenant, on the upper floor, named Sergey, whom we soon met.

The room Olga showed us was about 10 by 12 feet. It had an earthen floor, clay walls, and a small stove near the entry. On the left of the entry was a couch with torn upholstery and a narrow cot against the opposite wall. A small table and one chair near the stove completed the furnishings.

She showed us the outhouse at the end of her property and a make-shift grill consisting of a few bricks and stones put together in a rectangular shape, for outdoor cooking. She also showed us how to pump water from the artesian well. We agreed to pay 50 rubles a month. She embraced Luba gently and shook my hand before leaving us for awhile. Soon she came back with blankets, pillows, another chair, pots and pans and a couple of plates. "I hope you will be comfortable here," she said.

We left our belongings and went to secure our new jobs. Mahmoud, the veterinary doctor, lived on the other end of town, close to the railroad station. I walked fast with anticipation to meet my boss before dusk. The house where Mahmoud lived was rectangular with a wooden frame in contrast to the mud houses of the other villagers. I knocked on the door, a short, dark-haired woman greeted me. I told her I was looking for the veterinary doctor. She asked me in heavily-accented Russian to wait. A minute later Mahmoud warmly greeted me.

"I received a telegram from the state veterinary doctor that you would be coming, and I am very happy to see you," he said in fluent Russian, as he firmly shook my hand. I showed him my documents, but he hardly looked at them.

"We're not sticklers on formalities here. I see you're determined to do well. I'll try my best to help you do your best," he said, inviting me into his office, a spacious room filled with endless rows of bottles and books.

Mahmoud was in his 40s. He wore a colorful cylindrical cap and a bright striped robe. He had regular Caucasian features except for slightly slanted dark eyes. His lips were full and expressive, as if sculpted, and his broad smile revealed gleaming white teeth. I felt he took a liking to me as if I were a nephew or younger brother. I was so relieved.

Mahmoud asked about my home, tens of thousands of kilometers away, and how I got to Sir Daria. He asked about my sister, my view of the country, my impression of Tashkent and Sir Daria. He was questioning me, but without a trace of suspicion, and we went on talking until it was nearly dark. "We will continue our discussion tomorrow," he said.

"It's too late to talk business now, but come tomorrow morning as early as you can and we'll continue talking."

I ran back to our hut, eager to talk to Luba. She greeted me with a face that bespoke contentment.

"Mekhel, it looks like we have made it! Now sit down. Olga brought us some food for the evening meal." While we ate Olga's cabbage soup and potatoes, I described Mahmoud, and how much I liked him and felt a kinship with him.

"Well, I know you're a genius, but I got a pretty darn good job as well. I'm going to be teaching Russian and Russian literature in the high school," Luba said.

"How will they understand you?" I asked. "You don't know Uzbekian."

"The high school has a lot of children of Ukrainians and Russians who came and settled here. And maybe there will be Uzbek children who want to learn Russian."

We finished our meal, unpacked, and went to sleep. In the morning, Luba went to her work as a teacher and I went to see Mahmoud.

Mahmoud greeted me. "You came early. I'm glad, but I have a few patients to see," he said, pointing at the adjoining room in the back with several dogs and cats and their owners waiting.

Mahmoud came back after awhile, and began to describe my work. "First, the people you'd be working with do not understand Russian and you must learn some Uzbekian to be able to communicate with them," he said. He reached for an Uzbek-Russian dictionary. The dictionary was well worn, and Mahmoud commented that he had used it a lot through the years. He explained that the Uzbekian words were written in Cyrillic, the Russian alphabet, although the local newspapers used the Arabic alphabet, since the Uzbeks were Muslims and had been imbued with Arab culture before the Russians annexed the country. He suggested that I learn at least a few hundred Uzbekian words dealing with basic daily living.

Mahmoud told me about the farms where I would be working: three farms in a semi-circle about 20 kilometers west of Sir Daria. He told me he would get me a horse from the collective farm. "Now, how are you with horses?" he asked.

"I had a horse in Aksai where I was interning as a veterinary assistant, and I liked it very much," I said cheerfully.

Mahmoud proceeded to describe to me the work I would be doing, to keep the sheep and cattle healthy. The sheep produced tons of wool, essential for survival in the cold climate of most of Russia. The cattle produced meat, particularly important to feed the army, with the Ukraine and other meat producing areas of the Soviet Union now occupied by the Germans.

The most threatening disease of the sheep in the area was exema. The disease could not be eliminated entirely but could be mostly prevented with special baths. One of my important tasks would be to supervise these mass baths, Mahmoud told me. The farm people would assist me, but it would be my responsibility to see that all sheep get bathed and that none drink the poisonous bath water. Mahmoud informed me that we would visit a farm where they scheduled a mass bath, and I would see first hand how this was done. At the same time, we would visit all the farms, so I could meet the chieftains and get acquainted with Uzbek daily living.

Another important task I would be performing would be to castrate hundreds of lambs. Castration, Mahmoud told me, was essential not only to control the quality of the sheep population, but also to raise healthy males with good, thick fleece. The procedure was tricky; a lamb could die from excessive bleeding or infection due to improper castration methods.

Mahmoud handed over to me a book on infectious diseases of cattle, and asked that I study several of the chapters. "And now you'll excuse me, I have to visit the local farm. That is my daily routine, and you can sit here and study, or you can go back to your

place. By the way, where is your place, and how do you like it?" I described our good fortune of finding Olga, thanks to the town administrator. He shook my hand and left.

This was my introduction to being a veterinary assistant in Uzbekistan. I went back to our little cottage and began to read the book avidly, as if it were a novel. I continued well into the night by candlelight. Luba came home from her first day of teaching and brought with her a load of provisions she got from the collective farm.

"This is not like Aksai; here they treat teachers very well indeed," she said. She was excited as she unloaded cabbage, potatoes, corn, and peas. She proceeded to prepare our evening meal.

The rest of the week, and the following week, I went daily to Mahmoud, and he taught me different aspects of taking care of the sheep herds and cattle on the farms. He also gave me books on animal anatomy, which were beautifully illustrated, and a book on animal castration. I was elated with the personal attention he gave me. The veterinary assistant course I took in Aksai was superficial compared with the material Mahmoud taught me and the books he made me read.

One day he announced we would be visiting one of the farms to observe the bathing of thousands of sheep, and we would follow up with visits to the other two farms.

"We have to go to the collective farm nearby and fetch you a decent horse," he said. We went to the nearby stables, and Mahmoud found the keeper, who selected a five-year-old brown horse named Trotter. "He's a good horse, well trained for long trips," the keeper said, as he fastened the saddle, adjusted the straps, and handed me the reins and whip; he also gave me a bale of hay. Trotter was mine. I parted with Mahmoud, mounted

the horse and rode to our hut. I dismounted the horse, tied him in the little shed next to our hut, spread out the bale of hay and brought some water.

I went back to our room and resumed my studies. Shortly, Luba came back from work.

"Hey, Luba, we are the new owners of a horse!" I exclaimed. I took her to show the horse and she shared my excitement.

"So what are you going to do with him?" she asked me, bewildered.

"I'm going to ride the horse from farm to farm assisting Mahmoud. Tomorrow morning, I'm leaving with Mahmoud to visit the farms where I will be working," I answered with pride.

Early next morning, I rode my horse to Mahmoud's place. Mahmoud was holding the reins of a beautiful mare, white with black patches, considerably larger than my horse. He was dressed in leather breeches and a leather jacket. He looked quite different than in his normal office attire. He mounted his horse and we were off on our journey.

We traveled through miles of farm land. It was late fall. Long stretches of barren land or stocks of corn were reminders that the harvest was long since gone. The dirt road wound through orchards and small tents interspersed between the tilled fields. Mahmoud pointed at rice patties filled with water next to canals and cotton fields in the distance. A couple of hours later we reached the farm where the sheep bathing was to take place. The farm had a few tents, with the entrance facing a common square of land. The tents were round, with the walls made of heavy dark mats, and their conical roofs covered with thatch. We stopped at the largest tent and tied up our horses.

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"We're going to see Rahman. I see his horse is here," Mahmoud said. Rahman was the chieftain of this farm, the largest of the three. He was also the most senior member of the collective farm that these three farms belong to. His assistant, Kasem, was to accompany us to where the baths were going to be given.

Rahman and Kasem soon appeared and exchanged greetings with Mahmoud. Mahmoud introduced me to them, and Rahman haltingly began to talk with me in Russian. He was short, stocky, and looked as if he was in his 50s. He wore a leather outfit and had a short beard, nearly white, and sharp green eyes. His facial features were Caucasian, with well proportioned nose, mouth, and eyes, except for his lids which were slightly slanted. He had a gentle smile and spoke in a soft voice. Kasem was considerably younger with dark hair, black moustache, dark eyes, and light complexion. He was taller than Rahman, slender, and wore working clothes.

The four of us mounted our horses and trotted off to the outskirts of the farm where the sheep bathing was to take place. We were greeted by one of the shepherds. He led us to a small cabin where the bath solutions were stored in huge glass jars. Mahmoud took over and started preparing pails of the solution, diluted with water. The bath was nearby, a 40-by-5 foot clay channel filled with water. Mahmoud showed me how to calculate approximately the number of jars needed for the bath. Soon the sheep began to come down from the nearby hill—hundreds of them, thousands of them. At the bottom of the hill, there were two wooden fences, a hundred or so feet apart, narrowing down to just a few feet next to the baths.

A few shepherds, with the help of dogs, corralled the sheep into the mouths of the wooden-fence channel and urged the sheep with whips to move into and through the baths, one by one. Each sheep went through the bath in a matter of seconds, came out shaking its wet body off, and ran into the fields. The whole process, however, took several hours to complete.

In the afternoon, we went back to Rahman's tent. We were greeted by a beautiful, stately woman.

"Salaam, Salaam," the woman greeted us.

"Salaam to you, my dear Rashmi," Mahmoud answered her greeting.

The tent was rich and colorful. Rugs were hung on the walls all around the tent; they looked like beautiful paintings. Scattered, hand-woven rugs also covered most of the ground. In the middle, was a large hearth with a few simmering coals warming a large metal container. In one corner of the room was a pile of blankets and pillows. In another corner, colorful, bright robes hung on a rope. Near the entrance hung rows of kitchen utensils and pots and pans.

Rashmi invited us in. We sat down cross-legged on a rug next to a little round table. A young woman in her teens brought us tea and slices of flat bread. "Meet my daughter, Mahdu," said Rahman, turning to me.

Mahdu bowed her head, and I noticed her blush. I bowed my head in return.

"Pleasure to meet you," I said in broken Uzbekian.

Mahdu wore a beautiful, free-flowing silk dress. She was no more than 17, my age. She had long, dark braids, large black eyes, and soft red lips. For a minute, I thought of Sophie, but was distracted by Rahman's question.

"You like what you see?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered with enthusiasm, not knowing quite if he meant the tent or Mahdu.

We partook of tea and refreshments. Mahmoud turned the conversation to business, and I couldn't follow their Uzbekian. Rahman spoke slowly, but with authority. I sensed that Mahmoud had a lot of respect for Rahman. An hour later Mahmoud addressed me quietly: "Rahman invited us to join them for dinner and stay with him and his family for the night. In the morning we'll be off to see the other two farms, and then return to Sir Daria. Now, let's feed the horses and wash up." He led me outside the tent where Mahdu handed us pitchers of water and small towels. Shortly, we sat down on rugs around the hearth to have dinner, which Rashmi and Mahdu had prepared. We were to share food from one large round pot filled with rice, pieces of lamb, carrots and peppers; and there were no spoons or forks. I hesitated, and Mahmoud noticed it. "Use your fingers, just like this," he said as he reached his hand into the edge of the pot, removed a clump of food, and put it in his mouth. "This is our favorite food. We call it pilaf." Rahman did the same, and I followed. This was the first piece of meat I had eaten in a long time, and it was as delicious as were the rice and the vegetables soaked with the fat of the lamb. Rashmi also gave us tea and pastries she had made, dipped in honey.

As evening descended, Rashmi arranged a corner of the tent for us to sleep in, placing a thick cotton comforter on the rug with blankets for cover. Then she prepared bedding for herself and her family in another part of the tent. A wooden-framed partition made of striped cotton separated their quarters from ours.

In the morning, Kasim joined us for tea and fruit, and then the three of us mounted our horses again. We were off to see the neighboring farm, a few kilometers away. Mahmoud explained to me that the next farm was smaller and was supervised by a man reporting to Rahman. In fact, Tamir, the head of that farm, had another farm under his control as well. That farm, the third one that I would be responsible for as veterinarian assistant, was some ten kilometers away, and we would not be seeing it on this trip.

The tents of the second farm were smaller than the ones of Rahman's domain. Tamir was in front of the main tent to greet us. He looked very much like Kasim--tall, thin, with dark hair and dark eyes. His lids were also slanted, and he had a black mustache that made him look like the pictures of Genghis Khan I remembered from my history books. Mahmoud introduced me to Tamir who extended his hand to greet me. He had a strong grip, and I felt that he liked me, even though we couldn't communicate well. His Russian was as poor as my Uzbek. Tamir showed us around his property and invited us to his tent.

The tent was made in a similar fashion to that of Rahman's, but it had fewer rugs on the circular walls and only a few scattered on the floor. We sat down on the floor, cross-legged around a small table. Tamir introduced his wife, Leah, who was much younger than Rashmi, maybe in her late 20s. She wore a colorful striped cotton dress and was barefoot. She was vivacious and full of smiles. Presently she brought a young girl of about five, who sat on Tamir's lap, observing us quietly, while Tamir caressed her hair. Leah returned with tea and pieces of flat bread, slices of cheese, and fresh vegetables. Mahmoud, Kasim, and Tamir started a business-like conversation in Uzbek, which lasted

some time. Then we got up, bid our host goodbye, mounted our horses, and Mahmoud and I were off to go back to Sir Daria.

On the way back, Mahmoud told me that Tamir had another home on the third farm, the one we could not visit on this trip, and that he had another wife in that household. He told me to be discreet about it, when I visit Tamir's second home.

"You see, Meesha, we Moslems are allowed to have more than one wife, and a few of us do. However, the Soviet Government is against it. It is also quite difficult. You need to be able to afford having a second home, and women don't like competition. Apparently Tamir has no difficulty with either problem, and he is a pretty good man, very easy to work with."

We got back to Sir Daria as it was getting dark.

"Come back tomorrow and we will discuss the rest of your program," Mahmoud said as he bid me goodbye.

I went home, tied up Trotter, took off the saddle, fed him, and gave him plenty of water. I told Luba of my exploits on the farms. She was happy with her work in school as well. She had prepared some food, and we sat down to eat.

But all was not well. "The Germans have tightened their noose around Stalingrad," Luba said, "and there is street-to-street and house-to-house fighting all over the city."

I reminded Luba that Norbert had predicted this happening while we were on the train in Kazakhstan; he worried that if the Germans conquered Stalingrad, they would cut the Russians off from oil. "And oil is essential for the conduct of war. The tanks, the mechanized armor, the airplanes—they all needed fuel," I said boastfully.

"I know you're a genius, my brother, but don't make it sound like you know everything. Remember last year Hitler was to enter Moscow and finish off Russia. It didn't happen, did it?"

I resented Luba putting me down. Then I thought Luba may be right. Winter was coming, and I remembered how cold last winter was. The German killing machine didn't seem to work so well in wintertime, I reflected.

Luba told me that she had gone to the military office to inquire about Hershl, telling them how he disappeared in Voroshilovograd. The man suggested that she write to the headquarters of the Southern army. Luba sent a letter to the address the man had given her. "I've written so many letters, all to no avail," Luba concluded.

"The Kaganoviches and the Wieners haven't had much luck finding where their sons were either. Let's keep trying, Luba, and who knows, maybe some day we'll get an answer," I consoled her.

Next morning I went to see Mahmoud.

"You made a good impression, Meesha," he said. "They all seem to like you. You'll get along well with them." He asked if I read the book on castration he had given me and reminded me that in the spring we would need to castrate a lot of young lambs. "You might as well start learning about it right now," he said. In his office was a lamb that was to be castrated. I was to be his assistant.

He grabbed his instruments and arranged them on the table where he would do the operation. He went to the waiting room and came back with a white lamb, maybe six months old. "You will have to hold the lamb very carefully and strongly, and I will go wash my hands," he directed. He came back with a small basin of warm water, a packet

of cotton, a scalpel, a bottle of iodine, a few other medicinal bottles, and containers of powder. He washed and anesthetized the scrotum, made the one-inch incision, pulled out the testicles one at a time, cut the ligaments and the blood vessels away from the testicles, sprinkled some iodine and disinfectant powder on the wound and stitched the scrotum. The lamb bleated plaintively "baa" and Mahmoud lifted it in his arms. The whole procedure took no more than 10 minutes, and there was very little blood spilled. I was really impressed. I was also shaken. Instinctively I reached for my groin as if protecting it from harm. I felt sweaty and hot.

"So now you know all about castration," he said. "Next time I have a castration coming and you're in town, I will fetch you to see another procedure, and maybe you will finally do one yourself."

Meanwhile, he wanted me to spend much time on the farms. In fact, he had promised Rahman that I would be assigned to the three farms fulltime, and he wanted me to leave next day. He wanted me to visit each farm at least once a week. He urged me to be alert and report to him immediately any illnesses I detected. This ended my training for the work ahead.

Next morning I started out on my own to see Rahman, who was waiting for me when I arrived. After a quick breakfast he handed me over to Kasim, who mounted his horse and took me around to see the herds in the adjoining pastures. He introduced me to the shepherds and then he took me to the farms where the horses were, and later to see the cattle. Then we went to Tamir's farm. We had a quick lunch and again he took me around to meet the shepherds and the helpers. Finally we went to the third farm—the second home of Tamir—and I met his second wife.

Sarrat was in her 40s, quite a bit older and shorter than Leah, Tamir's other wife. She was walking with a cane, limping on her right foot. She was not attractive, but she had small, regular features and a kind smile. She looked straight at me, and her dark eyes were very sad. In an instant I understood why. Tamir spoke to her harshly, and though I didn't understand much Uzbekian, I sensed he was not happy with her. Shortly two teenage boys came in.

"These are my two sons, Ishmael and Ibrahim. They are big boys now and are a great help to me," Tamir said.

It was getting late. Tamir took me outside to feed the horse. We sat down, cross-legged, around a large, deep metal pot, as we had in Rahman's tent a few days earlier. The pot was filled with pilaf; however, there were far fewer pieces of meat in the rice. Kassim and Tamir left, and I stayed in the tent with Sarrat and the two boys. Sarrat unrolled a heavy mat, gave me a pillow and a blanket, and showed me where I could sleep for the night.

In the morning, Sarrat gave me flat bread with cheese and tea. Soon I was off to see the herd. Then I went to Tamir's other farm.

It was November, after the rainy days of October. The sun was warm, and the sky was bright. I had a feeling of exhilaration as I was heading home to see Luba after days of work. There were plenty of squashes, pumpkins, and even a few leftover melons, mostly rotting in the fields. I took a couple of them and put them in the two-sided sack stretched across the horse's back.

I came home and spent a peaceful weekend with Luba, the first weekend in which I felt we were out of danger. Luba had a couple of books that she had taken out of the

school library, and we shared the delight of Turgenev, Gorky, and Gogol as we read by candlelight until the wee hours of the morning.

In the weeks that followed, I repeated my trips to the farms nearly every week, spending some time also with Mahmoud. I liked the work, but the excitement of the first couple of weeks began to wear off. All-day trips on horseback became more tiring; most of all, they grew lonesome. Worry about the fate of my parents and all my relatives and friends in Dubno began to crowd my mind. Would I ever see my hometown again? Would Luba and I be stuck here forever? Was Hitler going to prevail, after all? These thoughts got more persistent and troublesome. I felt often sad and disturbed.

In late November, the war bulletins in the newspapers Luba brought from the library became more hopeful. Fierce fighting continued near Stalingrad and in the northern region of the Caucus and in areas between the Don and the Volga Rivers. On November 20, the newspaper reported a routing of the Romanian forces in a Soviet breakthrough southwest of Stalingrad. A few days later, a war bulletin announced the capture of 30,000 Romanian soldiers, including many high-ranking officers and generals. It appeared that the battle of Stalingrad was far from over and that the Soviets may succeed in thwarting Hitler's plans there as they had done near Moscow a year earlier.

In December, the weather turned unpleasant. It rained almost daily, and some nights were rather cold, near freezing. The roads became muddy and more difficult for Trotter to negotiate. I often came to Sarrat's tent, wet and shivering from the cold. She would treat me as if I were her older son, giving me hot tea and hanging up my wet denim jacket to dry next to the fire in the middle of the tent.

However, some unpleasant episodes began to mar my relations with Sarrat. One morning after I had come in chilled the evening before, the blanket and bedding Sarrat had prepared for me were all wet when I awoke. I was embarrassed and didn't know enough Uzbekian yet to express my regrets to Sarrat, but I think she saw it in my eyes. She was a kind woman. She stretched out the bedding to make sure it would dry for the night. But the next night it happened again.

When I got back to Sir Darya, I went to the hospital to see a doctor. He assured me there was nothing wrong with me. He suspected that it was all tension and stress.

The wetting accidents kept repeating for quite awhile. I understood the doctor, but my body didn't. Worse than that, I had terrible nightmares, seeing my father in a pool of blood and mother next to him, just her head, pale, drained of blood. They were so real, I could touch them. I would wake up, but they weren't there. I took a week off on the advice of the doctor, stayed in the hut, read books, and daydreamed a lot about the past and the present. At the end of the week, I felt stronger and full of energy, and I resumed my work on the farms.

* * *

Towards the end of January 1943, great news flooded the airwaves and the newspapers: "Germans surrender in Stalingrad!" More than 300,000 German soldiers, a whole army led by Field Marshal Paulus, had surrendered. Detailed newspaper accounts told of the brilliant Soviet Army strategies that had led to the victory. In the late fall of 1942, the Soviets had built enormous reserves of men and material, under artful camouflage, on the eastern shores of the Volga River. In December, those reserves poured stealthily across the frozen Volga River, catching the German armies unaware.

The Red Army, under Zhukov, proceeded to surround the German armies in and around Stalingrad. In early January, the Red Army completed their encirclement of the main German forces, and subsequent aircraft and artillery bombardment of the trapped German army forced their surrender.

The Germans' push to conquer Stalingrad ended. Suddenly the Soviet army was on the march, pushing the German army westward. Maybe this was the beginning of the end.

* * *

Springtime was beautiful. My body and my psyche began to adjust to my new country, new people, and new language. My Uzbek began to improve, and I could talk with the people on the farms. I was particularly touched by Sarrat's complaints and suffering about her competitor, the younger wife of Tamir. Then came the busy season: the baths and the castrations. Within a space of two weeks I successfully organized baths in all three farms for thousands of sheep. Mahmoud came out to observe the first bath, but left a few hours later, patting me on the back and telling me, "You're doing just fine!"

A week or two later we scheduled a castration at the smaller farm. Mahmoud came out for the first day and went over the main procedure again. He castrated the first couple of lambs, and then he watched me do it for an hour or two. He was satisfied, and so was I. In fact, I was thrilled at how quickly I learned to do the procedure without much bleeding or any other mishaps. I was happy to see the lambs running off to the pastures, bleating as if nothing had happened. I was even more proud, a few weeks later, when I learned that all the castrated lambs had healed well. I gained much respect from the

shepherds and with Rahman, Tamir, and Kasem. They started calling me Dr. Bolassi (the boy doctor). I began to feel much more at home with them and their families.

At the end of March I came home to visit Luba. She told me excitedly that the school had arranged for all teachers to get plots of land for their use. She had spoken to Sergey, and he had advised that we should plant mosh, the small peas we had been eating. He claimed that in the past few years the farm had excellent crops of mosh, and he expected this year to be no different. Later in the afternoon we went to see Sergey upstairs, and he accompanied us to the farm.

Sergey was in his late 50s or early 60s. He was short and stocky and very strong. He had a fair complexion, round face, lively blue eyes—full of fun— and red hair wildly spread over his nearly bald head. He was a former assistant chieftain of the farm, now mostly retired, and easy to converse with. He had lots of friends on the farm and in the village. He was alone, having been separated from his family as he had been picked up by Stalin's police from his large farm in the Ukraine in the mid-30s, and sent here. He took a liking to Luba. She told me he treated her as if she were his daughter.

I liked coming home on the weekends that I could. Luba and I spent long hours reading books she took out of the school library. We were also delighted to hear the young people of the village singing Russian and Ukrainian songs late into the night. They had beautiful, resonant voices and would harmonize as if led by a choir master.

In early August, *Pravda* reported a great Soviet victory in the Kursk and Smolensk areas. The Soviet armies, led by Zhukov, encircled a major German army, inflicted enormous losses on them and, effectively, eliminated the German forces in the central theater of war. This was, *Pravda* claimed, a victory comparable in size and

importance to the one around Stalingrad, half a year earlier. It reinforced mounting optimism that the Soviet Union had turned its fortunes around, and was on its way to win the war.

* * *

Harvest time brought great news to Luba and me. Our little plot of land yielded enormous amounts of mosh, which the farm was going to thrash, put in bags, and deliver to us. Furthermore, they were going to reseed the plot for the winter crop. All of a sudden, we felt secure. We had plenty of food. What a difference from the starvation in Aksai the year before!

I would travel weekly to visit the farms. The women of the three farms adopted me as if I were a part of their families. Mahdu became especially friendly. One evening, as I arrived and tied up my horse near Raman's tent, she came out with a pitcher of water to wash my hands. Then she gently caressed me and whispered, "I like you, I like you very much." I responded, caressing and telling her she was beautiful. We entered the tent as if nothing had happened. But she stirred my feelings.

Two days later, as I was returning from the farms to Sir Daria, I felt in turmoil. Mahdu was, indeed, beautiful. Her parents treated me as if I was their son. Was I being trapped? Was I going to abandon my faith and my people? Would I ever see my people again? A torrent of conflicts began to tear me apart. I felt shaken: I was neither a Jew nor an Uzbek. I was alone, without roots, without a home. Yes, Luba and I had each other. But Luba was maturing into a beautiful woman. Would she stay here, in this wilderness, forever? There was not a single Jewish person in Sir Daria.

An incident marred my relations with the chieftains and Mahmoud. One evening, after a large gathering in Rahman's tent, the two chieftains and Kassim sat down around the table and called me over to sign some documents. Rahman explained that the documents dealt with the disappearance of ten sheep. They wanted me to confirm that the sheep had died because of an infection. My ears perked up. I told them this would cause a lot of questions, since I was supposed to report all infectious diseases to Mahmoud.

"Don't worry about it," Rahman said. "We have taken care of Mahmoud, and you have permission from him to sign the papers." I was apprehensive and hesitated.

"Look," he went on, "we're all one large family, and we help each other, and we treat you like family, don't we? You sleep here, you eat with us, we do you favors, and we expect you to return the favors."

I signed the papers. Two weeks later, two men came from Tashkent to survey the farms and review all documents. Sure enough, they found the documents I had signed and asked me for explanations. I had to tell them the truth, but I was very unsettled and worried. Would this be another fiasco like the one in Aksai? I went back to Sir Darya and saw Mahmoud. He had already learned about the fraud, and he was very upset.

"I asked you, so many times, to report to me any irregularities as well as diseases of the herd. You should have checked with me before signing these papers!" he shouted. "If you get involved in anything like that again, I'll have to fire you."

I apologized profusely to Mahmoud and left. On my return home, I pondered about the gravity of what I had done and about the relationships I had developed with Mahmoud and on the farm. I felt that Mahmoud was an honest man, a true friend. I felt terribly guilty that I had disappointed him. But, I also became angry at what the

chieftains had forced me to do. They knew very well that they were cheating and were using me as a scapegoat. They lied to me and were dishonest with me. Suddenly, I felt a need to be very careful with the chieftains and their families. I also felt ashamed that I had responded to Mahdu's advances. "Don't you ever dare to touch her," I admonished myself.

One morning in late September, I got up hot and perspiring. I was to go visit the farms, but I could hardly get out of bed. Luba went to the local hospital and came back with a diagnosis. It was typhoid fever. The sickness was spreading rampantly in the whole area, and there was little the local doctors could do except to advise sufferers to take aspirin and to have bed rest. A few days later I got up feeling much better. It was a Friday, and I was to resume my visits to the farms on Sunday. Alas! Next morning Luba complained about the same symptoms, but her fever shot up to the point where she became delirious. I asked Sergey's help, and we got a horse and wagon from the farm to take Luba to the hospital. I stayed with her until a kind doctor assured me that Luba would be all right.

I had to visit the farms. When I returned three days later, Luba's fever had shot up again. This time the doctor was concerned, and advised me to stay close by for the next few days. I stayed with my horse in the adjoining little park, where I slept on one of the benches for the next two nights. I was frightened that Luba might die.

When Sergey and I came to fetch her with a horse and wagon, she looked so different. Her hair was cut, her beautiful braids gone. Her eyes were sunken and almost motionless. She looked like a skeleton.

"You're a good brother," the doctor said. "You'll need to continue being good. The illness has affected her mind, as typhoid fever does sometimes. I hope she'll pull out of that difficulty, but she'll need a lot of loving care."

We took Luba home. I put her gently to bed. I fetched a chicken from the farm and prepared a meal Mom used to make—chicken soup with potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables. Then I grilled a piece of chicken. I put it on a platter. I helped Luba sit up, but she wouldn't eat. I prompted her gently, but to no avail. Furthermore, she would not speak to me; she seemed unable to utter a word. I mounted my horse and went back to the hospital panic-stricken. I found the doctor. "What should I do doctor, what should I do?" I asked.

"I'm afraid, there's nothing you can do. You have to give it time, patience, and love," he replied.

I came back and Luba motioned she wanted to drink. That gave me an idea. I cooked the chicken in the soup until the meat was very soft. I tore the chicken into small pieces and mashed the contents of the pot with a fork, until they became almost liquid. I poured some of the liquid into a glass and fed it slowly to Luba. She liked it. This became her diet, in small quantities.

Slowly, she began to eat some soft vegetables and then pieces of meat. But she was still speechless. I would cajole her, beg her, tell her funny stories, and remind her of home and of us playing as children. I would sing the solos I had sung in the Great Synagogue of Dubno. She would listen with vacant eyes staring in the distance without uttering a word.

"Luba, Lubushka, wake up," I would plead. I felt so deeply about her! I bathed her with water I warmed up on the grid. I tended to all her needs. I caressed her. I felt as if I were tending to Sophie. But it was a different love; deep, sincere, but different yet all consuming.

Two weeks went by. Mahmoud assigned another young man to visit the farms. He was understanding. I began to doubt Luba would ever be the same. At times, I was petrified with the thought of Luba losing her mind and possibly dying. Our relationship during the past few years had become symbiotic. I felt I couldn't live without her, without her will to live and to fight, without her ingenuity in surviving amidst the chaos of the war. And I was so disappointed I couldn't help her get well.

A month had gone by since Luba had fallen ill. One day Luba woke up and called out my name. "Mekhel, Mekhel, where are you?"

I jumped out of bed, embraced her, and began laughing with joy.

"You're going to be well! You're going to be well!" I was so happy, so relieved. In a few days, Luba was back on her feet and a week later she returned to work.

Around Christmastime 1943, news from the front told of German retreat and Soviet forces scoring victories. According to *Pravda,* more than half of Soviet territory occupied by the Germans had been liberated. New reserves reinforced the Soviet army. New factories in the liberated areas swelled production capabilities of military aircraft and equipment, which was rolling out to the front, increasing Soviet superiority in the air and on the ground. There was also good news of a major victory of allied forces at *el Alamein* in North Africa and of the allied forces lending in Italy.

Life in the village became more comfortable, and there was more vodka available. One day, I had just returned from the farms and entered our hut. Luba wasn't there; she must have gone to see Olga, I thought. Presently Sergey came in waddling like a duck and sat down on my bed. His eyes were bloodshot and his face all flushed. He breathed heavily, and his mouth was covered with froth.

"The son of a bitch--the Georgian murderer!" he shouted. "Where's my wife now? Where are my Ivan and Ludmeela? Where's my home and everything I worked for all my life?" He began sobbing, and then he resumed his monologue more loudly and angrily than before. They talk as if they love people and want to do good, but they're all bastards. You hear me? They're all horrible bastards; they're killers—Stalin and all his gang. They've killed millions of good people and scattered the rest of us all over Siberia and this forsaken place. You know, they tell you they're fighting Hitler because Hitler is a bad man. Stalin is no better! Oh no! He taught Hitler how to take innocent people and send them to slave labor camps where they would freeze to death! And what did they do to me and my family? Where is my love, my wonderful woman? Where are my children?" He began sobbing again.

I was petrified. I feared someone would hear Sergey's harangue and report us to the NKVD. Sergey's rantings against Stalin was a capital offense, punishable by a death squad, or at the least, spending the rest of one's life in a slave labor camp in Siberia. I took off Sergey's boots and helped him to stretch out on my bed. Soon he collapsed into a deep sleep. Luba returned and was surprised to see Sergey in my bed. I told her in a hushed voice what had happened. I sat near the table and fell asleep. A few hours later Sergey woke up and embraced me, then went upstairs

Olga invited Luba to a New Year's Eve party. She was going to have her friends over, several of whom were Uzbek. I stayed in our room while Luba went into Olga's spacious kitchen. There were a dozen or so women and an Uzbek soldier, a boyfriend of one of the women. From my room, I could hear laughter and singing. Suddenly I heard shouting and commotion. I ran out and opened the kitchen door. The Uzbek soldier was holding Luba, who was shouting, "Let me go! Let me go!" The women around Luba starting pushing the soldier and shouting as well. There was chaos in the room. I stepped forward and lunged at the soldier.

The soldier turned to me with rage, shouting, "Get out of here, you little dirty Jew, or I'll kill you." I tried to punch him, but he avoided me and pulled out a knife from his back pocket. The women started screaming. Then Sergey appeared out of nowhere. He yelled, "You drop the knife or I'll kill you!" He punched the soldier in the face. The soldier staggered and dropped the knife.

"Get the hell out of here." Sergey shouted.

The soldier did. I grabbed Sergey's hand and thanked him.

Luba returned to our room. "Everything seemed to be nice. Then he got drunk and attacked me. You saw the rest of it," she said, shaking from fright.

I was frightened, too. Luba had almost been raped, I thought. She was alone here in the village so often. I was also enraged by this soldier, returning from the front, with the notion of "dirty Jew." So Hitler's poisons were penetrating even to this far corner of the Soviet Union.

* * *

News of devastation and mass graves of Jews in the liberated towns of Western Russia began to appear in the papers. Worries over the fate of our parents and relatives in Dubno filled our conversations. Luba had not heard a word about Hershl either. As I was traveling from farm to farm, feelings of remorse began to stir inside of me. What was I doing here, I wondered. Shouldn't I be at the front to avenge the blood of so many of my compatriots? Shouldn't I be fighting these monstrous beasts?

I broached the subject with Mahmoud. "I was thinking on the way here of maybe enlisting in the army to help fight the Germans," I said.

"Meesha, you're needed here. What we're doing is strategically important to the war effort," Mahmoud said.

Still the idea of serving in the army kept growing larger and larger in my mind.

Chapter 7: Serving Briefly in the Army – The Soloist

I Never Learned to Fight

Young men are foolish,
full of macho and pride;
They believe war is a game, a sport…
I joined the army and I felt like a hero
but soon I was tested and I came up short.

I had a bloody encounter with a soldier, a brute
and he had the advantage of girth and height.
He threatened to kill me and I feared he might,
for I never learned to fight.

Early in January 1944, I was returning from the farms to Sir Darya. The day was raw and windy, and it was nearly dusk. Dark, heavy clouds moved in, threatening to burst and engulf the town. I was chilly, tired, hungry, and anxious to see Luba.

The hut where we lived was at the other end of town. My horse knew we were getting close to home and quickened his pace. We moved along the narrow, winding, nearly-frozen dirt roads. White, round huts with thatched roofs, like overgrown mushrooms, lined both sides of the road. The small plots of land on the sides, the rear, or in front of each hut looked denuded with remnants of barren stalks of corn or occasional scarecrows standing like skeletons, evoking memories of summer when lush vegetation covered each plot.

As we approached our little hut, I spurred the horse into a trot. Soon I spotted my sister. She was lighting a fire on the outside grill. I stopped the trotting horse abruptly near Luba. "Hi! Lubushka, Galubushka," I exclaimed jovially using the first words of a

popular Russian song Luba was fond of. She turned around, startled. She was sad. Her face was pale and drawn. Her eyes were half-open with fear, and her lips were tight – as if she was holding back her tears.

"Anything the matter?" I asked with concern.

"Tie up your horse and hurry. I have a surprise for you," she said. There was bitterness in her voice. She went inside. She is so vulnerable, I thought; she hasn't yet fully recovered from her bout with typhoid fever. She lost a lot of her strength, vitality, and determination. Her hair, her beautiful hair, had hardly grown back, and she reminded me of someone who had just returned from prison.

I tied Trotter at the shed near the hut, took off the saddle, and hung it inside the shed. I gave him a pail of water and a bale of hay. I then took off the double bag with a melon in each pocket that hung across his torso, a gift from Sarret, and went inside.

I unloaded the melons and sat across from my sister at the little table.

"So what's the matter, Luba?" I asked with alarm.

"Here, read it!" she answered as she flung a letter at me.

I opened the letter; it was a notice from the military draft people that I was to report for duty the very next morning.

"They're really in a hurry, aren't they?" I said.

"I got the letter a couple of days ago, but didn't know how to reach you. Anyway, you're not going," she stated with finality.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What do you want me to do?"

"You told me Mahmoud would give you special papers to exempt you as his essential helper in a critical occupation. Why don't you go tomorrow to see him and get the papers from him?"

I told Luba that Mahmoud was away for two weeks in Tashkent, attending a conference of Uzbek veterinarians. He had been put in charge of the veterinary services of the whole region around Samarkand.

"Why don't you wait out the two weeks? Go to one of the farms for some time and wait till Mahmoud gets back. Then you'll see him and go to the military draft people to ask for the exemption," Luba persisted.

"Mahmoud's promise to exempt me from the army was just an off-the-cuff remark, and it was made several months ago. Meanwhile, the army has suffered terrible casualties as you hear and read in the news, and they desperately need more people. So, even if Mahmoud gives me the letter, it may be of no use at this point."

"But you're wrong, wrong, wrong! Why can't you wait a few weeks? What do you have to lose?" she screamed.

"Luba, you make it sound as if I'm being taken for execution. I want to go to the army to help fight Hitler. The news of mass graves, probably of Jews, makes me mad. Isn't it time that I kill a few Germans?"

"You're not a killer! You don't know how to kill." She was furious. "You have to know how to hate before you can kill and you don't know that either."

"Luba, this country hasn't been so bad to us. We've been able to survive here while the Jews from Poland and the rest of Europe are being slaughtered. I'm healthy, strong, and I have a responsibility to fight alongside other young people."

"Mekhel, you're healthy, but you're not very strong! And you're not a fighter. You don't know how to fight."

"But Luba, you agree that I'm pretty decent and fair. I have to be able to live in peace with myself for the rest of my life. Will you or others respect me if I shirk my duty and go AWOL?"

"Your most important duty is to stay alive. You may be the only male survivor on Dad's side as well as on Mom's side. And, you know, no civilized nation has the right to take a sole survivor of a whole family to the army to fight in a war. Furthermore, you're from Poland. You're not a Soviet citizen. They have no right to take you to the army in the first place."

"So what do you want me to do? Write a letter to Stalin?"

"Do you remember what our parents said to us? Mom asked me to take care of you and Dad wanted you to take care of me. Is this how you're going to take care of me, leaving me here in the wilderness?" Luba reproached me.

"Luba, we've been together for nearly two and a half years. We shared whatever bread we had and sometimes I would cheat to favor you when dividing the bread. When you became ill, I was there for you day and night. I tried to protect you as best as I could, and when that monster Uzbek tried to attack you, I nearly lost my life doing so. But I cannot dodge my responsibilities. I don't think Mom and Dad would want me to either."

"When I was near death in the hospital with typhoid, I fought back because of you. If you're gone, I have no reason to want to live. Do you understand?" She burst out crying. I hugged her trying to console her, then our heated exchanges resumed. Slowly, Luba's arguments began to sink in my mind. Leaving her alone, barely two months since

her serious illness, appeared heartless to me. Maybe she was right, I thought. Finally, we agreed that I would plead with draft authorities the next day, asking them to rescind their order because of my Polish citizenship. At the very least I would ask them for two weeks' delay so that the chief veterinarian could prepare proper papers for my exemption. Luba quieted down and we made peace.

Luba ran out to revive the fire in the grill and warmed up a dish of small peas from the sackful we had in the corner next to the stove. She unwrapped our daily ration of bread and we ate.

As she was cleaning up, I asked her how she would survive if I was drafted.

"I thought we agreed you wouldn't go to the army!" Luba shouted angrily. "So why are you asking this question?"

"Suppose that they take me, regardless of my arguments. What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I'll manage. Don't worry about me. I did save up some money, and the collective farm owes us much more grain they're keeping in store for us from last fall's crop. Thank goodness you took care of the little plot of land I got from the collective farm. And of course I'll continue teaching, or maybe I'll go to Samarkand, where there must be Jews from Poland."

I got up and collected the few belongings I would take with me in case I was drafted, and we retired. Luba lay down in the bed on the outside wall of the room and soon went to sleep. I stretched out on the cot on the adjoining wall. Instantly, waves of doubt and fear began to flood my mind and send shivers through my body. Luba was so often right. She was so much more mature and street smart. What if the draft people

didn't listen to my pleas and I had to leave Luba alone? This was no place for a single, young Jewish woman. The New Year's Eve incident with the Uzbek assaulting Luba was still fresh in my mind. I feared that this place would become more dangerous yet, as more soldiers returned from the front infected with the anti-Semitic virus.

Another thought came to me. Luba was right that I didn't know how to fight. I remembered being beaten up in public school time and again, and I would never fight back. I was always the smallest in class and not very strong; I felt helpless. I would come home and complain to Mom. Luba would often tease me, "Momma's boy." But there was more to it than that.

At home and in Hebrew school we were imbued with a culture that abhorred violence. It was ironic that Christians preached "turn the other cheek," but it was the Jews who actually did. The Christians learned to fight instead. I began to doubt my ability to be a fighter and felt weak and fearful. It must have been long past midnight before I fell asleep.

In the morning, the air was fresh; it was to be a sunny day. We had some tea and the remaining morsels of bread, and I went outside. The ominous clouds of the evening before had brought heavy rains, so the yard was soaked with water. I tended to my horse, took my bundle of personal belongings, and Luba and I went off, to the military draft station. The little office next to town hall was filled with young people and their accompanying families. I stood in line, Luba beside me.

Luba turned to me: "Remember to tell them you're a Polish citizen. The draft order sent to you is a mistake. Tell them you're essential in your work as a veterinarian. Don't forget, Mekhel."

Soon my turn did come. I was standing in front of a short, stocky man of about 40 with blond hair and penetrating blue eyes. "Your papers, *tovarishch.*"

I took out all my papers and put them before him, including the ones showing I had graduated from the veterinary school.

"I don't need the ones from the veterinary school," he said and pushed the papers back at me.

"I'm a veterinarian doing essential work here," I said.

"You'll be practicing your trade when you get back. Now let's go through your registration quickly."

"But I'm also a Polish citizen, and I should be exempt from service," I continued hesitantly.

"You'll take up that question when you get to your unit. I am here to register you and that's all."

I let Luba down, I thought, as I mumbled an angry goodbye to the officer. Luba was waiting in the other room. "Luba, the guy wouldn't even listen to me. I lost my case. I'll have to leave you now. "

She didn't say a word. She embraced me and began sobbing. A few minutes later, she quieted down and collected her thoughts. "What should I do with the horse, Mekhel?"

"Take it to the collective farm, and they'll deliver it to Mahmoud. Say goodbye to Sergey. He's been good to me. I hope he'll be helpful to you, too. Don't forget to check on the grain the collective farm owes us and take good care of yourself."

"Mekhel, please write, as often as you can."

"Are you going to stay here, Luba?"

"I'm not sure. If we lose contact, use our Dubno home address as a last resort. I will try to get back home as soon as the war ends. Mekhel, be very careful. You may be the only one I have left in this world." She was near tears again. She turned around and left.

I stepped back inside a large room where we were told to undress, and I went through a physical exam. Soon after, we were served some food--bread, beans, and cold borscht. Around noon, two dozen of us were taken by horse and wagon to the railroad station.

A train was waiting at the station. I boarded one of the cars and sat near a window. Soon we were off. On both sides of the tracks were open fields, endless and barren. They were crossed by canals and dams. Some of the fields were filled with water, set aside for rice. Now and then we passed small collective farms with large circular tents, the living abodes of the Uzbek farmers. Large herds of sheep appeared, grazing in the hills. Far in the distance, faintly visible, rose the snow-capped foothills of the Himalayas.

An officer entered the car. He was of medium height, in his late 20s or early 30s. He wore well-polished boots, a long gray coat with red epaulets and an officer's hat with a red band all around.

"Comrades," he began with a big smile, "we're going to a very fine military training place, not far from Kattaqurghan. You'll spend a few months there learning the art and science of war. We want you to become good soldiers. It's young people like you, skilled to fight, who'll help us defeat the monstrous enemy." He went further, quoting

from Lenin and Stalin and ending with a boisterous, "Long live the Soviet Union! Long live our great leader, Yosif Vissaryonovich Stalin!" Then he left.

My mind wandered, recovering from the shock of the morning and the evening before. The unthinkable was happening. Luba and I had been separated! What was Luba going to do? I owed her so much, I owed her my life and I was abandoning her! She had an uncanny way of sensing and confronting danger. And she was smart. She grew taller and taller in my mind. She was my protector, as if she were my mother!

A curious thought took hold of me. It was comforting to feel I had a mother. I felt secure. Yet I also felt dependent, relying on somebody else. Mom had loved me and had been protective of me. Luba extended that relationship. Something within me had begun to rebel long before this call to army duty. I had to stand on my own feet! I had to grow up and face the world on my own. That was the real reason I had ignored Luba's advice to hide for a few weeks and wait till Mahmoud returned to Sir Darya to get me an exemption from the army.

"What have you got to lose?" Luba had kept repeating in despair the evening before, but I never answered that question. Yes, I would have a chance to be on my own now, but at what price?

The train came to a halt. Several trucks at the station took us a few kilometers to a military base on the outskirts of Kattaqurghan. We disembarked and entered a long barrack. We had to register and get our wardrobe, military gear, and canteen. I was assigned to a group of about 15 other young inductees to start a new life as a Soviet soldier.

A young man in his 20s, medium height with a pleasant smile and voice, introduced himself. "I am Andrey Petrovich Sokolov. I am your sergeant, and I will be in charge of training you to become good soldiers."

We introduced ourselves, including a brief summary of our background. I made a point that I had been born in Poland, ran away with my sister from the advancing German armies and landed in Uzbekistan. Andrey showed us to our bunks, instructed us on how to make our beds, how to take care of our rifles, and told us about our daily routine. He also showed us how to wrap up our legs with special ribbons to protect our legs from injury.

It was time to have dinner. We were served cabbage soup with potatoes and quite a bit of meat. This was followed by an hour or so of indoctrination on Communist ideology with particular emphasis on Stalin's book, *Questions of Leninism*. We went to our bunks, conscious of the need to rise up at 6 a.m.

The next two days we were kept inside the compound, our days filled with introductions to the various units, services, functions and responsibilities of each, the nature of our training program, and political lectures. On the third day we ventured out of the compound, in military gear, for a long march to faraway plains where the military exercises took place. The march was accompanied with song. The song was started by a soloist (zapyevala), followed by the others in the refrain. Andrey, the sergeant, picked the tallest guy in the first column of the first row to be the soloist. He had a loud voice, but he sang off key. I was in the last row, being the shortest man in the 16-man group. I joined in the refrain and tried to bring the music back to a steady key, using my musical training as a soloist in the Great Synagogue of Dubno before the war. This caught Andrey's

attention. On the way back from the exercises, he turned to me and said, "You start a song!" I began singing *Katyusha*, a popular Russian song. I was singing well, and I was thrilled that everyone joined in the refrain with great enthusiasm. As we got to the barracks, everybody praised me and patted me on the back and pronounced, "*Maladyetz, Maladyetz (great job, great job)*." Being a soloist in the army was, apparently, a great honor. The Russians loved to sing, as I had learned from my years on the various collective farms. The role of the soloist in the army was to enliven the units, to help the troops cope with exhaustion or with the challenge of combat. Later in the evening, I learned that it had its downside as well.

Soon we went to eat. It was dark when I left the mess hall, heading towards the barracks. Ivan, the former soloist, suddenly appeared in front of me.

"Why did you take the job away from me?" he yelled with a voice full of anger.

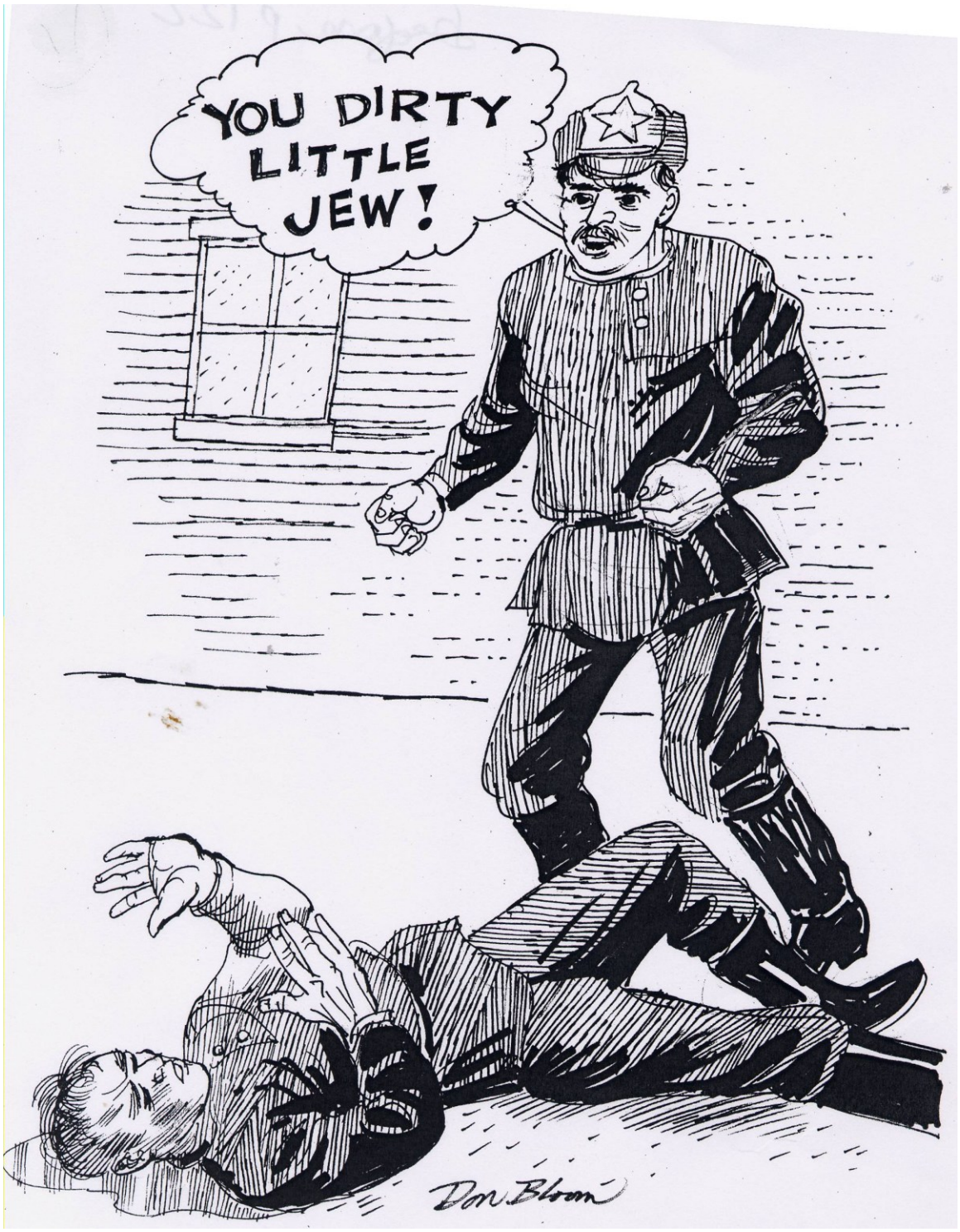
"I didn't do any such thing. Andrey asked me to start singing."

"You're lying, you dirty little Jew," he continued furiously.

"No, I am not lying and don't call me a dirty Jew," I countered.

"Why, you want to fight me? You wouldn't anyway because you are a coward."

As I tried to protect myself, he swung with all force at my jaw. I was knocked unconscious, and when I finally opened my eyes, he was gone. During the introductions, he had mentioned that he had been born in the Ukraine. I knew from my earlier experiences in Poland that the Ukrainians hated Jews. 'Anti-Semitism has no borders,' I remembered Mr. Wiener saying, on our flight from Stalingrad. I felt bitter, helpless and lonely.



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Don Bloom, E. Brunswick, N.J.

I kept writing letters to Luba, almost daily. I told her about my exciting promotion to be the soloist of our small platoon. I wrote to her about our exercises in the fields and how good it felt to be part of the huge defense enterprise. I wanted to cheer her up, make sure she would not worry about me. I was waiting anxiously to hear from her, but I didn't get any reply. In fact, none of the other soldiers in the group received any letters either. That worried me.

Weeks went by in basic training. We would march out of the compound and walk sometimes as far as five kilometers to reach the training fields. There we would engage in running, climbing over hurdles and obstacles, lifting ourselves by holding onto ropes and learning how to crawl with our heads down, often in mud. Then we would march back to the compound, exhausted. I lost a lot of weight, though I felt quite healthy, at least for awhile.

Time went by, and my worries increased. I didn't get a single letter from my sister. In fact I didn't even get an answer from my letters to Mahmoud, although I dismissed that, thinking that Mahmoud must have been busy trying to replace me. But Luba! I was sure she would answer my letters immediately. I inquired at the main office repeatedly and was assured that my letters did go out and I should not worry. But worry I did.

The horrible dreams of earlier, harder times revisited me. I would see my father lying in a pool of blood with his throat cut open, screaming for help. Mother would be next to him, but I would see only her head, with her dark hair arranged neatly in a bun, and her brown eyes motionless. Her face was pale, almost white. Her tight lips moved

imperceptibly, and I could hear her whisper, "Mekhel, Mekhel." They both were so close to me. I tried to touch them, but I couldn't. I would wake up screaming and drenched in sweat and could not go back to sleep. On other nights I would see Luba. Her head was shaven—just as it had been when she came back from the hospital fighting off typhoid fever—her face drawn, almost lifeless. I would talk to her, but she would not answer. She would look at me with her gray eyes wide open and show no interest in me. The nightmares and variations thereof would revisit me almost nightly, depriving me of rest. I would get up in the morning, walking like a zombie.

My confrontations with Ivan kept recurring. One evening it became particularly violent. We were sitting in the mess hall having dinner, and Ivan recounted his sexual adventures. Turning serious, he explained that semen was produced in the male's breast, just as milk is produced in the female breast. I sat opposite him a few seats away and couldn't help but snicker.

"What are you snickering about?!" He turned to me.

I was reluctant to start a fight but said quietly that semen was produced in the testicle to which everybody nodded approval. When we finished dinner, we left the mess hall. On the way back to our barracks, Ivan caught up with me.

"Why did you embarrass me, you dirty little Jew?" he shouted with rage.

"I didn't mean to, I just wanted to straighten out the facts," I replied.

But Ivan didn't want to debate. He began pounding me, hitting me with both fists on my face. I began kicking him with all my force, but he hit me harder yet, and I fell to the ground, unconscious. A few minutes later, Andrey, the sergeant knelt over me, with a few other soldiers around.

"You're cut pretty badly near the eyes." he said. "Don't pick any fights! Stay away from that brute!"

I slowly got up and went to my bunk. Andrey came to see me a bit later. He told me he had harsh words with Ivan and hoped Ivan would behave. Then he reproached me impatiently: "You must learn how to fight back! Soon you may be confronting Germans in hand-to-hand combat. They are tougher than Ivan, and I will not be there nor will anybody else be there to defend you."

In late March the exercises became more strenuous. We would often march in full gear 10-15 kilometers in the rain and mud and return to the barracks in the dark. I would often be drenched and chilled when coming from the field. One evening I developed a high fever and was sent to the infirmary. I had pneumonia, which the examining doctor considered dangerous. My one-week stay in the infirmary saved my life as well as opened my eyes to the reality of the war.

The food in the infirmary was unforgettable: cutlets of veal, beef prepared goulash style (the way Mom used to do it), all sorts of salads and desserts. I had not eaten such food since I left home more than three years earlier. It was certainly in sharp contrast to the regular evening meals of the last couple of months, mostly cabbage soup with an occasional piece of meat. TLC was very effective. I soon turned the corner and began feeling better.

A young lieutenant, sharing the infirmary with me, introduced himself as Gregory Goldstein. I told him of my background.

In the next two days the lieutenant and I did a lot of talking. I felt as if I had found a friend. Soon I was allowed to leave the infirmary for a few hours, and Gregory introduced me to the officers' library.

A new world of information was open before me. I was able to read daily and back issues of *Pravda* and *Izvestya,* as well as *Red Star*, the army's newspaper. I discovered the Soviets' ire with the U.S. for not opening the second front. I also found out—reading between the lines—that the Soviet army was experiencing heavy casualties. The retreating German armies, hurt fatally by the surrender of Von Paulus's army near Stalingrad and subsequent major defeats near Smolensk, were still a formidable killing machine. In particular they heavily mined every road they abandoned, as well as the fields and forests in their paths. The Soviet army was, apparently, ill-equipped to deal with the mines, except by using soldiers to detonate them. This resulted in heavy casualties. I read with horror accounts of massive graves of civilians killed by the Germans in Kiev and other Ukrainian towns heavily populated by Jews. My heart sank, and I lost hope of seeing my parents, relatives, and friends left in Dubno.

I shared my concerns with Gregory. He had access to other, more restricted army publications. He confirmed the heavy casualties the retreating Germans had been inflicting on the Soviet army. "The closer they come to their pre-war border, the tougher they get," he said. He was angry the Allies had left the Soviets alone to fight Hitler. He hoped the Allies would keep their promises and open another front in Europe. Meanwhile, America had reduced delivery of vital equipment to replenish Soviet losses, claiming they needed to prepare their own forces for the invasion. The Soviet army was

particularly short of minesweepers. "It is, unfortunately, a dangerous time to be a foot soldier, and I feel for you," the lieutenant said.

A week or so after I entered the infirmary, I was discharged and was allowed to return to my barracks. Soon my comrades came back from the day's exercises in the fields. They welcomed me warmly and asked a lot of questions at dinner. When I got back to my bunk, Andrey visited me. He was warm and friendly and asked whether I was ready to resume my soloist activities. He told me that Ivan had taken the soloist task back, and no one was able to follow him in the refrain. I told Andrey I would be okay but expressed concern that Ivan might again be angry with me.

"Let me worry about Ivan," he said. "You just do a good job."

The next day we marched out of the compound, and I began a spirited military song and continued leading in the singing the rest of the day. After the meal I left the mess hall, and Ivan caught up with me.

"You did it again, you dirty little Jew."

"Andrey asked me to do it."

Ivan was fuming. "It is you who betrayed a comrade, you little Judas. You could have told him you didn't want to sing."

Without waiting for my answer he started hitting me as hard as ever. I fell to the ground and lay there bleeding from the nose and mouth. People gathered around me, and soon Andrey appeared.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you," he said sympathetically, as he leaned over me. "You've got to learn how to fight back."

He helped me get up, get to the bunk, and brought me a towel soaked in cold water, and then left. I reflected on what Andrey had said. How can I learn to defend myself? I have tried to fight Ivan, but I felt as if I was fighting a tree. He was so strong and towering over me. I felt weak and helpless.

I learned later in the evening that Andrey put Ivan away for three days of confinement. When Ivan saw me after the confinement, he turned to me with eyes full of hatred and menace. "Wait till we get to the front. You'll be the first one that I'll try to get rid of."

One evening a week or two after the incident with Ivan, one of the soldiers in an adjoining bunk ran towards me.

"Meesha, I have a surprise for you, come with me."

He took me by the hand, dragging me out into the darkness to one of the compound's gates that were used in evenings for soldiers to exchange their rations of soap, cigarettes, and other amenities for homemade food to supplement their bland, meager food rations.

"Here is your sister!" my friend shouted with delight.

It was Luba! She looked much healthier than when I had left her three months earlier. Her face had filled out, her hair was longer. She had lost the "prisoner out-of-jail" look that had followed her bout with typhoid fever. The sentry let me step outside. I sat down with Luba on a bench, and we began to talk.

"Why haven't you written to me Mekhel? You promised you would," she said bitterly.

"I wrote to you every day. I haven't received an answer from you. I've worried so much. I thought I lost you. I thought I was the only one left of the whole family."

"I see," she said after a minute of hesitation. "Something must be rotten in the State of Denmark. I tried to find out where you were and to get in touch with you, but to no avail. Mekhel, you don't look so well, you're full of bruises, you lost so much weight, and your eyes look sunken. What's happening to you?"

"I'm all right. Tell me about yourself. How did you get here? How did you find me?"

"After you left, I decided to leave Sir Darya." Luba answered. She proceeded to tell me that Sergey helped her get the grain the collective farm owed us. He also arranged for her to travel once a week with the collective-farm wagon to the farmers' fair to sell the grain. The worst part of it was walking back to Sir Darya from the market, some 10 kilometers away, with the money hidden in her clothes. After selling all the grain, she packed our belongings and left Sir Darya.

"How did you know to come here?" I asked.

Luba explained that she observed that the train which I boarded in Sir Darya headed west. She learned there was a big military training compound near Kattaqurghan and she guessed that the train was going there.

Luba told me that she had arrived here two weeks earlier. She inquired in town hall and learned there were some people here from Dubno, one of them being Moniek Sadownik, a neighbor of ours. He helped her find a little room next to where he and his wife live. She took on a temporary job as a seamstress and began her search for me.

She nearly lost all hope of finding me. The main office of the compound denied that I was here. She did not believe them. She started coming here daily and watched carefully when the troops marched out in the morning and came back in the evening. She had to carefully inspect the thousands of soldiers that were marching out and coming back through each of the five gates of the compound.

After doing it for nearly ten days and not finding me, she was almost ready to give up in despair. One evening as she was observing returning troops, she heard my voice as a soloist of a group, and instantly recognized it. The following morning she visited the headquarters again and asked of my whereabouts, telling them she knew for sure that I was here. Again, no response from them. Finally she came here and started asking the soldiers who came to exchange the amenities whether they knew me, describing how I looked and telling them that I was a soloist. "So you see my efforts have paid off," she concluded with her voice breaking. We were silent for awhile. Then she asked about me.

I obliged and described to Luba the training conditions, the barracks we stayed in, the food we ate. I also told her about my bout with pneumonia and the few violent encounters with Ivan. It was rather late when the sentry asked me to come back in.

I went back to my bunk but couldn't sleep. Luba grew large and heroic before my eyes. What a sister, I thought. What a heroic woman! I was also disturbed that my letters had never left the compound and were probably discarded, that Luba's inquiries by letter or in person were never answered, and that headquarters actually lied to her and denied my presence here. Something inside my system of beliefs and loyalties to the country began to crack. Was the military hiding the truth to keep soldiers' families in the dark?

Were the soldiers destined to become mine sweepers and their deaths hidden even from the closest of kin? This was not the country I thought I was ready to fight and die for. I was disappointed and alarmed.

I saw Luba nearly every evening for the next few weeks. Then she failed to show up. I was waiting for her anxiously. We were scheduled to leave for the front in a week or so. Would I be able to say goodbye to Luba, I wondered and worried.

The martial training became more intense the last week before the end of our tour. The training emphasized particularly hand-to-hand combat. I failed repeatedly in these encounters with my comrades or even with dummies.

"You have to learn to hate before you attack to kill," Andrey would repeat time and again. "You must be aware every second that either your enemy or you will die."

I tried to follow Andrey's instructions. I pictured in my mind challenging Ivan in combat, remembering how he hurt me, and how angry I was when he called me dirty little Jew. But I couldn't muster enough hatred or anger to hurt my comrades now. I could not imagine killing somebody.

Then came the real test, to shoot at targets with live bullets. Again, I failed.

"You're not a fighter. You'll never learn how to fight!" Luba's warnings before we parted in Sir Daria rang in my ears. Yes, Luba was right. She was always right.

A week after she had seen me, Luba showed up. "What happened, Luba?" I asked with alarm when she came back to see me.

"I was away in Samarkand. I just wanted to see the 'lay of the land!' I saw a number of people from Dubno, including Asher Balaban, my classmate from the gymnasium, who is pretty high up in the government, a 'big shot.'"

"There is something urgent I need to tell you," I interrupted her. "Our unit will be leaving Kattaqurghan in three days and probably sent to the front."

"That is why I went to Samarkand," she said. "I am a step ahead of you."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Let's talk about it when I see you next," she answered in a hushed voice. "Mekhel," she continued, "I have heard that the soldiers are allowed to visit their families before they leave for the front. I want you to get a permit to visit your sister. Will you do that?"

"All right," I said, and Luba and I parted.

Luba came back the next evening. We were scheduled to leave Kattaqurghan the day after. "Do you have the permit I told you to get?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Let us go to my place so we can talk more freely," Luba said.

Half an hour later, we came to her one-room apartment. "Sit down, relax, my brother," Luba said. "I want to talk to you, and I want you to listen very carefully," "I have arranged for you to escape from the compound and from Kattaqurghan."

I was stunned. "Do you know what you're saying?" I yelled at Luba. I told her of the colonel informing us, after morning roll call, of our imminent departure for the front. I told her also that the colonel drew our attention to a soldier, allegedly a deserter, hanging by a rope from scaffolding. He warned that the same fate would befall us if we dare to desert the army.

"Mekhel," Luba answered, "I know what I tell you to do is very dangerous, but you going to the front is no less dangerous. I have tried to arrange everything for your safe escape. All I want you to do is to have a little faith and a little courage."

"But Luba, running away like that hurts me and my convictions. I have never committed a crime, and what you're asking me to do is criminal, punishable by death. And, even if no one catches me, I will feel ashamed and guilty all my life," I protested.

"Mekhel, I know how you feel, but you are not realistic. You think that you'll go to the front and kill a few Germans, avenging their mass murder of millions of innocents, possibly including our parents. However, you have never learned to fight, to hate, to murder somebody. You're short and thin – you're no match for a German soldier in combat. Besides, you'll probably be sent with hundreds of your comrades only to clear mines; you'll become a minesweeper," she said. "I heard in Samarkand that many soldiers have come back badly wounded, sometimes without limbs – blown up by mines. I don't want my brother to be blown up. I want you to live. You're probably the only remaining male member of Dad's and Mom's families. You have a right to live; you have an obligation to live!"

I wanted to counter what Luba said, but I was speechless. Luba had used some of the same arguments a few months earlier, just before I left for the army. Then, I was more sure of myself and more confident about willingness to go to the army. But, the last few months had taught me of my limitations and weaknesses. I couldn't stand up even to one Russian bully; how would I face a German soldier? I felt helpless and in a quandary. Maybe Luba was right; she had been right so often before, during the past three years.

Luba saw that I was hesitating, and she resumed her pleadings, more determined than before. "Mekhel, we have no time to waste. There's a train leaving for Samarkand in an hour. If we don't catch that train, you'll have to return to the barracks and go to the front. Please listen to me. I want you to live. I want both of us to return home safely. Maybe we'll find our parents alive." She waited a while. "Take off your army uniform and put on the clothes I prepared for you," she commanded. I got up slowly and followed her command. In a few minutes, I was ready to go.

Luba had all her belongings packed in a bundle. She hid my uniform under the bed and tidied up the room. "Now let's run to the train station!" she said.

We went through the narrow, empty streets of Kattaqurghan and reached the train station. Luba handed over to me a train ticket that she had purchased earlier and a new passport her friend in Samarkand, Asher Balaban, had prepared for me. Soon the train arrived, heading towards Samarkand and we boarded it.

"Follow my instructions carefully," Luba commanded sternly. We quickly went to the wagon next to the locomotive. She approached the man shoveling coal into the engine furnace and handed a bundle of rubles to him and said, "Don't you want to rest a bit? My brother will help you." The man handed the shovel to me, and I became an "engineering assistant." Luba took some coal dust and smeared it on my face. "Now you look like a real helper," she chuckled.

Luba's maneuvers avoided the danger of a confrontation with the conductor, who was almost certainly an NKVD officer.

We arrived in Samarkand in the wee hours of the morning. We disembarked and went hastily into the station, mixing with the crowd. Luba took me by the hand.

"You're trembling Mekhel, and you're very pale. Quiet down, or you will alarm people around us," she whispered. "Sit down on the bench and wait here," she said firmly. She left the belongings with me and ran out. A few minutes later, she returned, motioning me to come with her. She had hailed a horse and buggy. Luba told the driver to take us to the main street of the old city.

When we got to the main square, Luba directed the driver through narrow alleys to a small building; she paid him. We went up a flight of stairs, and Luba opened the door to a room she had rented for us. "This is going to be our home. It's not great, but I hope it will do for the time being."

Chapter 8: Binding Wounds in Samarkand - The Weaver

A Polish Proverb

A thief would often tales sire
That his hat was on fire…

The room Luba had rented was part of a building with small apartments for transients like us. She thought this would become our new domicile. Alas, I was in no condition to remain there. I was overwhelmed with guilt, shame, and fear. I had committed a crime, punishable by death according to Soviet army code. I had always been the "good boy," obedient, ready to help, ready to give of myself, and to do good. I had never hurt anybody and never broken the law. Overnight, I became a criminal. I felt guilty also of letting Andrey down. He was protective of me; he was good to me. I was the only Jew in the platoon. Yet, it seemed that being Jewish did not affect his relationship towards me. Will he now think less of Jews? Will the whole brigade in Kattaqurghan become aware that a Jewish soldier had deserted? Beyond that, I felt guilty that I let down my host country—that saved my life and that of Luba.

I felt ashamed that I failed a real life test, the ultimate test of willingness to give one's life to save the lives of many. I was ashamed of myself, my limitations, lack of courage and stamina. I was also ashamed of letting down my own Jewish people and not fighting against the monstrous enemy of the Jews. And, I feared being discovered. The Polish proverb "A thief will often stories sire/that his hat was on fire" kept haunting me. I felt as if the ground under me were on fire, and I wanted to run away, but where to? I

feared the policeman on the street as well as the letter carrier knocking on the door. I became suspicious of people's questions and even their glances, and my fears aroused suspicion among strangers and acquaintances alike.

Worst of all, I became angry at Luba. I attacked her bitterly that she had orchestrated my escape and made me feel guilty and puny. She countered that I was behaving like a child. We began to quarrel over the slightest issues.

Luba found a new place for us to stay, but my state of mind and behavior did not improve. She reproached me repeatedly that I was arousing suspicion that would lead to my capture. Then, through acquaintances, we met a young man who was working on a collective farm, fixing farm machinery. It was harvest time, and the farm needed all the help it could get. The young man was willing, even eager, to take me with him as his assistant.

The young man, Moniek Perlman, was 24 years old. He was about my height, but had a larger frame. He was handsome, with classic Mediterranean facial features, lively dark eyes, a ready smile, and an animated face. He spoke with ease and was excited about the work he was doing.

I joined Moniek to work on a farm seven kilometers from Samarkand. I bid Luba goodbye; she was cheerful. She reminded me of a famed Russian saying, "don't worry, don't fret, joy and dancing will come our way yet." We embraced and parted. I was sad. Luba was my only friend since we had left home. Would she be all right?

On the way to the farm, Moniek spoke of his younger years in Poland and the last years in the Soviet Union. He had been born and raised in an Orthodox Jewish family in Krakow, western Poland, now occupied by the Germans. He had attended Yeshiva

schools but had also a good secular education, mostly from his mother. He was an avid reader of classic books by Polish as well as major Western authors. Although he had never finished high school, he had several patents to his name. He had a major patent pending for a redesign of the Polish telephone system. The war abruptly changed the course of his life.

He and his older brother, Joseph, had left their family and run east when the Germans invaded Poland, in the fall of 1939. They had stayed in Lvov, and in July of 1940, they—like many of their compatriots—were picked up by Stalin's secret police (NKVD) Moniek and Joseph were sent to a slave labor camp some 500 kilometers north of Gorky.

Soon after Moniek and Joseph arrived in the camp, the weather turned extremely cold with temperatures of minus 20 to 30° F. Many of the inmates suffered frozen limbs. Moniek and Joseph learned to prepare makeshift shoes from newspapers, which saved their feet. The cold winter, the hunger, dysentery, and malaria in the summer decimated the camp. Seven thousand inmates passed through the camp, but only a few hundred survived.

Moniek was assigned to cut down trees in a huge forest, from early morning until dark. He got an idea of installing a pulley-like arrangement on the back of a truck that was hauling the logs. One end of the pulley would be wrapped around a log and haul the log onto the truck. The head of the camp liked the idea and adopted it, though made it known that it had been his idea. But he gave Moniek extra bread, just to keep him from telling the truth. "It was God's will that we survive," Moniek said.

In the fall of 1941, an agreement between Stalin and General Sikorski, head of the Polish government in exile, bound the Polish army, under General Anders, to join the allies' fight against the Germans, and committed Stalin to release all Polish prisoners. Moniek and Joseph left the camp and traveled by train to Samarkand. Joseph found work as a bookkeeper on a collective farm and Moniek became a maintenance engineer in another collective farm, both farms within a few kilometers of Samarkand. Moniek used his inventive skills to devise an easy way of fixing machinery on the farm. He had been working on this collective farm for several months, staying at the farm weekdays, but visiting his friends in Samarkand on weekends to observe the Sabbath.

We reached a large barn in the middle of little huts on the farm. Moniek stayed in one of the rooms at the corner of the barn. The room was small with a little window barely letting in sunlight. It had a cot where Moniek slept, but there was enough room for me to spread out on the dirt floor.

Shortly, we went out in the field and inspected a disabled combine for harvesting. Moniek explained that fixing the combine involved improvising the missing parts as best he could, because the collective farm had hardly any inventory of items or machinery to replace missing parts. Collective farms had strict allotments for new machinery and machinery parts. Every requisition of a new part had to be approved by a central agency in the Agricultural Department in Tashkent, or worse in Moscow. Meanwhile, crops had to be harvested, vegetables and fruits collected, or they would rot. The need and the panic to achieve the quotas imposed on the collective farm were unbearable, particularly at harvest time.

That is why the farm found his services valuable. He could improvise on the spur of the moment replacement of broken or missing parts with similar/modified parts from another tractor or combine. "The operator of a fixed piece of machinery often looks at me with awe and is very thankful," Moniek said.

He led me to other tractors and trucks waiting to be fixed and instructed me to assist him in finding substitute parts from abandoned vehicles and machinery.

I became comfortable and felt at ease on the farm, as time went by. My Uzbekian, though sparse, was adequate to communicate with the farmers. The weather was beautiful, the days were balmy, and the nights mild. I loved village life, having been introduced to it at an early age near Lublin where my father had worked. I began to feel at peace again.

A month after my arrival on the farm, Moniek came back from Samarkand, excited with the news that the allies invaded the beaches of Normandy in France, opened another front in the war with a huge armada of aircraft and ships; and hundreds of thousands of men were attacking the Germans. "Thank God, I think this is the beginning of the end of Hitler!" he joyously proclaimed.

I was thrilled. Maybe we would soon all go home. Maybe Mom and Dad were all right. Maybe we would all be together again.

Six weeks went by. The work on the collective farm was invigorating as well as therapeutic. Moniek was like an older brother to me. We shared one little room, ate the same meals—mostly starches, vegetables and fruit—and we shared long walks after work. Moniek was nearly five years older, but he was well advanced beyond his years in

the knowledge of people and technology. As the chief mechanic on the farm, he was well respected and much in demand.

My work was far from challenging. Occasionally, I would assist Moniek in fixing a part or searching for a replacement. Most often I would work from nearly dawn to dusk in the fields, collecting by hand the fruits and vegetables that the machinery had missed. I had plenty of time to think--to brood over the events of the last six months and to think about the future. I would return from the fields physically tired, yet mentally feeling more wholesome.

Towards the end of July, Moniek came back from Samarkand and told me he had seen Luba. She was fine. She had moved to another place in the Old City and was anxious for my return. He also brought awful news of horrors discovered by the Russian army as it advanced westward. Accounts on the radio and in the press described mass graves uncovered in every town abandoned by the Germans. The Soviets did not identify the victims, but it was apparent that the mass graves were those of slaughtered Jews.

I was disturbed and worried. Are Mom and Dad alive? And what about Grandma, Aunt Peshia and all my other relatives? What about all the Jews of my hometown? Are they in one of those mass graves? I shared my fears with Moniek.

"You should not assume the worst," he said. "You should have faith in God. Truly the Almighty would not let us down. He saved us through the ages, and He'll save us again. Have faith!"

Moniek was a believer. He took it literally that our God would not abandon us. He was sure that things would turn out well, and that the news of mass killings might have been exaggerated. He thought that, even in tragedy, we should not question God's

will. I began to respect his deep faith. I was also impressed with his rose-colored, hopeful views. They certainly helped him to be at peace, to be more optimistic than I was. Maybe it was mostly because of his innate abilities and his self-confidence and assurance. Whatever its origin, he was more determined than ever to live, to prosper, to give cogent meaning to life, and to be a good servant to God. I respected his views, though my own faith in God was badly damaged.

* * *

In the beginning of August, I woke up one morning and saw truckloads of men and women, young and old, children and babies disembarking near the barn. The adults carried with them bundles of what seemed like clothing. There was havoc, children crying, mothers wailing, men stunned, everyone disheveled—surrounded by a few NKVD guards carrying rifles.

"Who are those people?" I asked Ishmael in the barn.

"Tartars from Crimea," he answered.

I had to run off to help Moniek, and I told him what I saw.

Later in the evening we found out that these were a small group of hundreds of thousands of Tartars who were forcibly removed from Crimea and scattered through the villages, collective farms, and towns of Uzbekistan. Apparently they had cooperated with the Germans during the occupation, and Stalin knew how to deal with people of questionable loyalty to the Soviets or to himself. As the days went by, I was able to communicate with these people in Russian—for they knew no Uzbekian—and heard heart-breaking tales of their suffering during the German occupation and since, at the hands of the NKVD.

* * *

In mid-August I decided to return to Samarkand with Moniek. He helped me locate Luba. We were ecstatic to see each other.

The place Luba had found was in the old part of Samarkand—referred to as the Old City—essentially an entry foyer to an Uzbek's dwelling with a tiny room in the corner previously used for storage. Luba had ingeniously transformed it to our living quarters. She had bought a small stove and kettle, some wooden bowls and utensils, a small table, and a bench—all placed neatly in the foyer. The tiny corner room contained a large mat to sleep on, some old blankets, a small night table and a kerosene lamp. I looked at everything with admiration and thankfulness.

"Luba, how did you manage to find this place and make it so beautiful?"

"A palace it isn't, but it will do," she answered.

Luba prepared dinner—cabbage soup with potatoes and fresh fruit. After the meal, she said, "We have a lot to talk about." Luba told me that a number of Jews had escaped Lodz and formed here a cottage textile activity of weaving cloth and selling or bartering it to the local population. Lodz used to be the textile center of Poland and consisted mostly of Jewish artisans and merchants. The Lodz Jews who came here managed to build, with local carpenters, hand looms which they would sell or rent to unemployed refugees, and teach the refugees to weave cloth. They would also provide the yarn and the dyes for coloring the cloth. The Uzbeks love the colorful material, which they use for making robes.

"So I thought that you and I could become clothes manufacturers. You'll do the weaving, and I'll do the selling," she concluded, smiling, and waited for my reaction.

"You're wonderful, you are a wonderful dreamer," I replied. "And where will we get a loom? How will I learn to weave?"

"First, I've signed you up to take a two-week course with a real master of the trade, and you can start the course on Monday, if you wish."

"And then what?"

"Not so fast. I'll tell you the rest of it tomorrow. Now maybe it's time that we go to sleep. You must be tired after walking from the farm. How did you like the farm? How do you like Moniek? "

"Not so fast," I teased her. "Now let's go to sleep, indeed."

The next morning Luba and I went to a hut a block away from ours. We entered a large room with several looms. A middle-aged man came out to greet us.

Aaron was a short man with red hair and reddish cheeks, blue eyes, and a lively face. He was animated and moved quickly with authority. He wore pajama-like pants and a sweatshirt. I could see he was all business and competent at what he was doing. "All right, Luba, you leave your brother here, and I'll put him to work. Let's not waste time."

Luba left. Aaron pointed to the young men working at three looms. I shook hands with them. They were full of smiles and cheer.

"Now, let me take you to my loom and introduce you to this wonderful machine. You see, Mekhel, it is just a few planks put together, nothing to it. But it produces gold. What I mean is that the clothes we make here are like gold to us. More than that, they give us bread on the table, food for the family. Without this wonder machine we would be starving, just as many around us are. So we have to treat it with respect. Now let me show you how this machine is all put together and how to work it."

The loom was framed like a table without a top, about five feet wide, and eight feet long. There was one roller on each end. The roller at the near end held cotton fibers spread over its width, with hundreds of strands extending tautly like a sheet towards the other end of the loom and rolled onto the other roller. At the other end, a cam, with hundreds of long needles, held up the strands with an upper half of the sheaths, going through the eyes of the needles, lifting them from the main sheet. The cam was attached, with brackets, to two pedals. Pressing one pedal lifted the cam; pressing the other pedal lowered the cam through the strands of the main sheet. A pulley attached above the loom directed the motion of a shuttle, a mouse-like device containing a spool of thread. Pulling the handle of the pulley propelled the shuttle across the sheet of strands, laying a thread across the main strands. Propelling the shuttle in the reverse direction would lay another thread across, and so on. Moving the cam to and fro would secure each vertical thread and create new material.

"Mekhel, come sit on the bench next to me," Aaron said. "Put your feet securely on the two pedals. Now move your feet up and down; get the feeling of the cam going up and down. Put your left hand strongly in the middle of the cam and move it forward and backward. Practice these moves to get into the rhythm of it." Aaron left me for a while, and then returned. "Now, let me show you how the pulley works. Hold the pulley handle in your right hand and pull it down. I mean, give it a healthy jerk; don't be afraid of it." I did that and the shuttle went flying out of the channel. "Well, you need to jerk it, but not as hard. You need a little practice."

Aaron proceeded to give me exercises. After a few days, I was able to start producing material, albeit very slowly, very carefully. Furthermore, the material had lots

The Weaver

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Don Bloom, E. Brunswick, N.J.

of wrinkles, and the edges were uneven. Aaron was patient with me, and at the end of two weeks he felt I was pretty good at working the loom.

"There is more to this trade than sitting at the loom and pulling the strings of the shuttle. So get started, Mekhel. Find a job to bring you and Luba some income, and come here evenings as often as you can, and we will talk about other matters of the trade," Aaron said as he bid me goodbye.

When I came home, Luba was waiting with dinner for me.

"How did it go?" she asked.

I told Luba that Aaron felt I was doing well and he wanted me to find a job.

"I am way ahead of you," Luba said. She told me she had found new friends who live nearby, Rabbi and Mrs. Zuckerman. Esther, Mrs. Zuckerman, was Aaron's cousin. "I spoke to Esther and she would love to have you work for them. How do you like that?"

"You're a magician, Luba. Watch out! They might arrest you for witchcraft." I burst out laughing.

The next day, Luba went with me to the Zuckermans. Rabbi Zuckerman was in his 60s, of average height and thin. His hair was all gray, and he wore a cylindrical dark skull cap and thick eye glasses. He had a beard with short, thin, white hair. He shook my hand warmly as he greeted me in Yiddish. "Good to see you, Mekhel. Luba tells me that you have finished training with Aaron, my wife's cousin. He's the dean of Samarkand weavers. If he says you're good, I'm sure you are. You look like a smart young man. I hope you'll like working with us."

"You know, it's funny. Making a living here is illegal. If they catch us, they'll send us to Siberia as capitalists. Living in poverty, starving to death, that is permissible.

But preparing clothes for the people to wear is forbidden! It's a great state we live in. Still, it's better than being killed by the Germans, so let's thank God for that. Just be careful and don't talk about it. We're happy to have you. Esther, come meet Mekhel, Luba's brother."

Esther was short with light skin and dark hair. She looked like my Mother. I was stunned by the resemblance. She was younger than her husband, probably in her late 50s. She had a warm smile and kind brown eyes. She greeted me and Luba enthusiastically. "Come, join us for breakfast. You know, we just lost a young man who worked for us for a while. He decided to go into this business with his brother and left us. So I feel that God sent you to us."

At breakfast Rabbi Zuckerman gave a thumbnail summary of their life in the Soviet Union. They had fled Bessarabia, Romania, at the beginning of Germany's onslaught on Russia and made their way to Samarkand, essentially taking the same route that we did. But they had come here two years earlier and were well established by now.

The rabbi interspersed his account with sarcasm and ridicule of the government. It was clear to me that he hated the Soviets with a vengeance. He spoke with conviction and vehemence, as if driven by a force he could not control. His words began to resonate with me. I felt he was an honest man, and he clearly knew much more of Soviet life, of city life than I did.

We finished breakfast. Luba left for work, teaching in the local school. I ensconced myself at the loom, which was new. The cedar wood of which it was made emitted fresh scents that teased my senses. The pulley and the pedals moved with ease. The sheath of threads stretched before me, multi-color stripes that shimmered in the

morning sun reflecting through the window. I felt good, excited to be useful, to be productive. I worked at full speed. At the end of the day I had made 15 meters of new cloth. That would sell for quite a bit, I thought. The Zuckermans were very happy, too.

"You're a pretty good worker," the rabbi remarked between incessant cigarette puffs.

Life moved on with new meaning and a new rhythm. I went back to see Aaron.

"My, my, you look like a new man! Life must be treating you alright," Aaron greeted me. I told Aaron of my work, and that I was anxious to take him up on his offer to learn more about my new vocation. He spent a few hours showing me patiently how to pull through hundreds of strands through the eyelids of the cam and how to fasten them at the base of the roller. He also told me how to interlace different colors of the strands, to prepare more colorful material.

In the beginning of September, the Uzbek Economic Institute announced the start of a new academic year. I went to the Institute and registered. I had to take an entrance exam, since I did not have any documents from previous education. Indeed, the only documents I had were under a new assumed name, Michael Guberman Kesler, Guberman being my mother's maiden name. A week later I became a student of the Institute, attending classes three evenings a week, after my work on the loom.

The Institute was in the New City, a couple of kilometers from where we lived. My walks to the Institute opened a new world for me. The Old City was overcrowded, with narrow dirt roads and winding alleys among dilapidated huts. It was crowded, filthy, noisy, and dusty, and redolent with the pungent odor of decay.

The new part of Samarkand had wide streets with sidewalks, solid multi-storied buildings, large parks, and banks near the Zerafshan River. The Uzbeks and the refugees lived in the Old City; the Russians, the officials, the professors at the university, and other professionals lived in the New City.

On my way to the Institute, I walked past a number of museums and mosques, the most impressive being the Mausoleum of Tamerlane. The Mausoleum had colorful mosaic glazed tiles glistening brightly in the sun, as if newly laid. I was astonished to learn that the building dated back to the 14th century, when Tamerlane, the famed conqueror, swept the region and established Samarkand as his capital. Tamerlane and his descendants rebuilt and beautified the city, whose beginnings went back 2,000 years, to the time of the birth of Athens and Rome.

Samarkand, I learned, had a colorful and often tragic history. It was located at an important crossroads between Persia, Turkey, and China; for long periods it was the center of the Silk Route to and from China. Legend had it that Alexander the Great extolled its beauty. A thousand years later, the city came under Arab domination. Early in the 13th century, Genghis Khan and his Mongol hordes invaded and ruined the city, chasing out and killing most of its inhabitants. The city had a rebirth under Tamerlane, and it prospered for several centuries, before being torn by strife and wars. Late in the 19th century, it came under Russian domination. Throughout the upheavals of 1,200 years, since the Arabs' conquest, the city remained essentially Muslim.

Tamerlane's Tomb

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Mark Sherman, Delmar, C.A.

Two months had passed since I began working for the Zuckermans. Esther and Luba became close friends; and indeed, Esther treated both of us as if we were part of her family. We became constant guests for celebrating the Sabbath with the Rabbi and we would partake of delicious Sabbath meals. They also treated me well financially. We began to save money.

Luba's business instinct started buzzing again.

"Mekhel, I think we should buy our own loom and have our own business," she said one evening.

"Luba," I protested, "the Zuckermans are treating us like their own children. Are we going to walk out on them? And are we going to spend all of our savings buying a loom?"

"Let me take care of this. I think I can find a good worker for the Zuckermans to replace you, and I think we can buy a loom mostly on credit. Don't worry, Mekhel. In fact, Osher Balaban—you remember him, he was the one who made up your false papers—is willing to lend us some money." She was so sure of herself, and I had learned to trust her instincts. A week later Luba delivered on her promises.

Furthermore, the Zuckermans were happy to see us do well! "It will be our greatest pleasure to see you prosper. We are old people, and we have plenty to live on. Besides, the new man you introduced to us seems to be capable and eager to work. We should have no problem," Rabbi Zuckerman assured me.

Luba managed to find an inexpensive, second-hand loom, which we put in our small corner room. In fact, the loom took up most of the space in the room, leaving only a small area, no more than four by ten feet for our living quarters. The loom was in pretty

good shape, and it became my constant partner. I would start work at 6 a.m. and work until dusk with the exception of the three nights when I would visit the Institute.

Soon, with Aaron's help, Luba and I learned to prepare the cotton sheath. We bought a big kettle in which we would boil water and add the proper dye. We would place the cotton bale in the colored water and then dry out the cotton. I learned how to secure the cotton strands on the loom and thread the strands through the needles of the cam. Furthermore, we would intersperse bales of different colors with bands of white to provide an attractive longitudinal design. We became "professional" weavers.

It was a profitable enterprise. I would produce 20-25 meters a day of colorful cloth, and Luba would sell it. She would wrap herself with the cloth and put a raincoat on top. Then she would proceed to the "black market," a place in hidden alleys, hopefully away from the watchful eyes of the NKVD. There she would exchange the material for fresh produce or, sometimes, rubles or occasional dollars.

My education proceeded as well. I did not have time to study or to read assignments. I compensated by being attentive to the lectures and avidly absorbing the material. I was eager to learn, to do well. Sometimes I would return home in the evening and review my notes by candlelight with the help of a textbook I could occasionally borrow from the Institute library. My exam scores reflected my effort. I was getting nearly perfect scores and was praised by my professors for classroom participation.

Winter came along, particularly cold for this part of Uzbekistan. Food grew much scarcer. The small rations of bread and meager necessities were being reduced, and often long queues of people waiting for their rations would be turned away. Typhoid, dysentery

and other infectious diseases spread though the town. In the mornings the corpses of emaciated men and women appeared, leaning against doorsteps of some huts.

Rumor had it that America was now busy supplying its own troops engaged in bitter fighting with the Germans on the Western Front, and its former largesse to Russia was diminishing. Yet, there was now a greater need than ever for clothing in the cold weather. Our small enterprise actually prospered, despite deteriorating conditions in the city.

Early spring brought good news from all fronts. The Soviet army was moving into Germany proper and advancing towards Berlin. The allies had eliminated the Germans' threat of encirclement at the Battle of the Bulge and were advancing eastward towards Germany.

Luba and Moniek began to see each other more often, and Luba looked happy and animated. Her hair had grown back, though not long enough to braid. I noticed her excitement when Moniek came to visit; she would return from an evening out with Moniek radiant and beaming with joy. Their relationship grew more intense with every passing week. Luba was falling in love, I thought. I was delighted to see her happy. I was a bit jealous, but I felt my time would come as well. Meanwhile, I was preoccupied with work and studies. I felt I was the head of the household, providing sustenance for Luba and myself; that made me proud and satisfied.

One afternoon she came back from the market, joyful and excited. "We had an excellent day today! We made a lot of money. I told you not to worry, not to fret. There will be joy and dancing in our street yet. I think we have enough money to get another loom and hire somebody to work side by side with you."

"Luba, you're crazy. We don't even have room to put another loom in, and how many times can you wrap yourself with cloth? Do you want to be caught by NKVD? Then we would lose everything. We cannot do it! Don't do it!" I shouted at Luba. She backed off the idea. But a week later she came back with it. This time she had already rented space in a nearby hut, and she was going to get somebody to help her with the sale of the cloth. There was no way to deter Luba.

* * *

On May 9th at dusk, the Zuckermans came into our hut, flushed with excitement. "The war is over! The war is over!" Rabbi Zuckerman yelled. "We just heard it on the radio. The Germans capitulated. Hitler committed suicide!"

We were intoxicated with joy. After so much suffering and so many deaths, the war was over. The monster was gone! I felt as if I were clean again. After years of feeling as if I were covered with filth, mud, and vermin, it was as if a warm shower had washed it all off, and I was clean again.

We went with the Zuckermans to their hut and were glued to the radio, listening to breaking stories and commentaries on the exciting news, until the early hours of the morning, with occasional breaks for refreshments. Then, exhausted, we began to wonder. Was this celebration for real? Where were our families? What had happened to our homes? Was anybody there alive?

In May 1945, Moniek had written home to Krakow to let his family know that he and his brother were in Samarkand. In mid-June, Moniek received a brief note from his Mother: "I have survived, Dad did not. I'm thrilled that you and Joseph are okay. Come

home soon." Moniek broke down. He regained his composure and said, "We must hurry and go back home."

Luba had written many letters to Dubno Town Hall, but we had received no reply. Newspapers were filled with reports of more mass graves being discovered by the Red Army throughout the Western Ukraine. Doubts haunted us and saddened our lives. There was no news of Hershl either. Nearly four years had gone by, and Luba's many inquiries had remained unanswered. We hoped for the best, but feared the worst.

Meanwhile, Joseph, Moniek's older brother by some seven years, announced he would marry Leena, a refugee from Krakow, who lived across the road from us. Leena had lost her parents the year before to typhoid fever, and she lived alone. Moniek had learned about Leena by accident, when visiting his friend, a neighbor of hers. He had mentioned that his brother was living on a farm ten kilometers away from Samarkand and was eager to meet somebody. Moniek's friend called Leena in and Moniek concluded on the spot that she would make a good wife for Joseph. Thus, Moniek became the matchmaker. Shortly thereafter, Leena and Joseph married and moved into Joseph's cottage in the village, where he was the accountant of the collective farm.

A month later, in August, Luba and I decided to return home and Moniek offered to join us. Luba beamed with delight to accept his offer; I was happy too. Joseph's superior at the farm was able to get us permits to leave Samarkand. We sold the looms and packed our meager belongings. We were ready to start our journey back home.

Chapter 9: Going Home – Home No More

No Monuments to the Fallen in Dubno

There are no monuments to the fallen, in Dubno,
nor in any Shtetl of Belaruss and Ukraine.
But come and see, in the pastoral fields near Dubno,
skulls and limbs scattered in a ravine.

There are no monuments to the fallen in Dubno,
no ovens, no showers, no remains of deadly gas.
In my bereaved hometown of Dubno,
the SS shot and buried young and old en masse.

In early September 1945, Moniek, Luba, and I boarded a train to Krasnovodsk in Turkmenistan on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. This time we did not need to avoid armed sentries or jump onto a moving train. We purchased our tickets and obtained papers (illegally) through the good offices of Joseph's superior. We were sorry that Moniek's brother and his wife chose to stay for a few days to finalize their departure with the authorities of the collective farm.

We were on our way home! We had not heard from the Dubno town hall about our parents. Still, I was full of excitement and hope. Maybe my parents did manage to survive. And Sophie? Would it not be wonderful to see her? I saw her as clearly as the day we had parted, amidst the falling bombs. Was she alive?

Two days later, we were in Krasnovodsk. There, a day later, we secured a boat to cross the Caspian Sea and land in Baku, on the Sea's western shore. From there we went by train to Odessa, a port on the Black Sea. This gave us our first shock! Odessa, nearly half of whose inhabitants had been Jewish before the war, was now free of Jews. They had all been murdered and were in mass graves! Our stop in Kiev a few days later

confirmed the horrific truth. The Jews of Kiev had been murdered and buried in a ravine called Babi Yar. Finally, we arrived in Lvov.

Lvov was the main city of southeastern Poland. It was about 100 kilometers southwest of Dubno, with a population of several hundred thousand, of whom about half had been Jewish before the German invasion.

We soon found a synagogue that was open for refugees. We were given a small corner in one of the rooms with two benches to sleep on. Moniek and I shared one of the wider benches. In the middle of the night, Luba tugged me by my shirt.

"You go and sleep on my bench Mekhel," she whispered. I obliged.

Next morning Moniek said to me. "Luba and I decided to get married, and we need to find a rabbi immediately. Soon it's going to be *Succoth*. We have to hurry."

Later in the day we had a wedding ceremony. Moniek and Luba became man and wife, and I was their witness. The other witness was a man from Dubno, who introduced himself as Yakov Hirsh. He was in his 30s, of medium height with dark hair and dark eyes. He was thin and wiry and moved with energy and confidence.

"I knew your parents in the ghetto," he said to Luba. "I'll speak to you after the wedding. *Mazel Tov! Mazel Tov*!"

I looked at the eyes of the newly married and I burst into tears. There was life after death, after so many deaths. Suddenly I felt life was worth living. I felt much more secure and hopeful.

The rabbi left, and we moved to a small room to have some refreshments the synagogue provided. Moniek was holding Luba in his arms, but I saw Luba crying, crying convulsively.

"What is the matter Luba?" I asked.

"Where's Mom? Where's Dad to be here with me?" she replied, as she continued sobbing. "I'll be all right, Mekhel, don't worry."

Half an hour later as we lingered, Yakov came back, accompanied by a woman. The woman introduced herself: "I am Sarah Gochberg. Do you remember me? We were classmates."

"Oh yes! I remember very well," Luba answered as they embraced.

"You must come to my place," Sarah said.

Sarah was Luba's age, though she looked older. She had red hair and lots of freckles on her face, lively green eyes, and a warm smile. She was not much taller than Luba. She was quite nicely dressed in a red silk blouse with a woolen dark gray skirt.

We picked up our few belongings and left the synagogue, with Sarah and Yakov leading the way. A few minutes later we entered a large brick building. We climbed two flights of stairs, and Sarah opened the door to her apartment. "Come in, come in, make yourselves comfortable," she said.

We put our belongings in a corner of the kitchen.

"Come, let me show you my living quarters," Sarah said. She took us around her spacious apartment.

"This is beautiful," Luba said, "How did you get such a gorgeous apartment?"

"Come into the kitchen. Relax and I'll tell you everything," Sarah said.

Sarah prepared some tea and pastries and began telling of the horrors of Dubno, and the miracle of her survival.

"I must caution you that what I will tell you is going to be very difficult for you to hear," said Sarah. "Stop me any time you want. The unthinkable, the unbelievable did happen. Nobody could have imagined a cultured people, who had represented through centuries the best of literature, music, and science of the West, would behave like animals. But they did! And they organized their horrific crimes in such a devilish way that no one ever heard or dreamed of."

"They had special units, called *Einsatzgruppen,* trained as murderers, killers of old people, children, women—no discrimination—as long as you were Jewish." Sarah's face began to flush and her voice broke in anger. She waited awhile. Then, she proceeded to tell what had happened in Dubno.

On the fifth or sixth day after their arrival, the Germans gathered the best known Jews of Dubno--the two rabbis, well-to-do businessmen, the professionals, about 100 of them--and hanged them in the middle of the market square. Then came selections of women, picked up on the street, who disappeared and were never heard from again. This was followed by random "actions," as they called them, during which they would pick up hundreds of people, take them to the Jewish cemetery, shoot them, and bury them in deep ditches.

Towards the end of 1941, the Germans set up a ghetto, enclosing the streets of Berka Yoselevicza, Stara, and a couple more. Then they began to starve the Jews, reducing the rations of bread and eliminating all other food. Yet the Jews had to work at the jobs they were assigned to. It was heavy work, and it involved long hours. Sarah worked as a seamstress from dawn to evening. The winter months brought cold, famine,

and illness, and many of the old and the very young were dying. This was followed by mass executions to liquidate the ghetto.

In April 1942 during Passover, the Germans, with the help of Ukranian Gendarmes, cordoned off at night a third or so of the ghetto. They forced all the Jews from the segregated area into the streets and hauled them off, by foot and on trucks, outside the town into a ravine near the river. There they forced the men to dig ditches, telling them it was for anti-aircraft defense. When the ditches were completed, they lined up rows upon rows of the Jews and machine-gunned them. They covered the graves with the dug out soil, using bulldozers. A few people escaped and came back to the ghetto to tell of the atrocities. That's when Sarah's mom and dad ordered her to leave the ghetto. "I'll tell you more later about my miraculous survival. Let us first have something to eat," Sarah concluded.

I was shocked. I had read of the horrific crimes of the Germans. I had feared the worst. But this was a personal account from one who survived. The horror of hearing this awakened me to a new, dark reality. Mom and Dad and all my relatives were dead, and my home was home no more!

Sarah took Luba by the hand. "Come. Let me show you where you are going to stay with Moniek. Mekhel, you come along as well."

Sarah showed us the two bedrooms where we would be sleeping.

"I hope you can stay here for a while with us," Sarah said. "Now go and wash up and I'll prepare dinner."

We returned to the kitchen, and a young, handsome man came in.

Sarah introduced us to Sasha, her husband. He was in his 30s, tall and blonde with an energetic face and demeanor. We sat down and began to talk. Sasha was a Russian Jew from Odessa, then a colonel in the Soviet Army, who had just finished his tour of duty. Sarah had met Sasha in Lvov, and they decided to settle here. Sasha became a successful trader of goods and money, taking advantage of his military combat history and knowledge of people in Odessa. They obviously lived a good life.

Sarah prepared a beautiful dinner for us. "You deserve a decent meal after the wedding," she exclaimed as she brought in a first course of broiled fish.

The meal continued with meat, vegetables, and potatoes and ended with dessert. Sarah left to wash the dishes.

Yakov spoke up: "Are you ready to hear more of the horrors?"

"Go on," Luba said.

Yakov told us that when the Germans set up the ghetto, our home became the housing for 20 or so people, and he and his parents were among them. So were our grandmother, our aunt with her little boy, our uncle, his wife and their two daughters, and several of Dad's relatives.

One day, after the first wave of executions, our parents left the ghetto to reach our Dad's friend, a Ukrainian, in a village near Dubno. Towards evening, they returned with Mom near collapse. A young SS man named Hoffman had recognized Mother and turned our parents back, whipping them on the way. According to Mom, Hoffman was a classmate of Luba. And, he sometimes visited our home.

"Yes, yes, I remember him. So when did he join the SS?" Luba asked.

"That I can't tell you," Yakov answered. "But I know that many Poles, and particularly Ukrainians, cooperated with the Germans. And Hoffman is a German name. Maybe his parents or grandparents were German or Austrian. Who knows?" This incident convinced our parents to stay on in their home.

Three months after that incident, the Germans went through another action. This time they decided to get rid of all older people and young children, any and all Jews who were not able to work. They swept through the remaining part of the ghetto and picked up about 3,000 people, among them our grandmother, our aunt, her little boy and several of Dad's elderly relatives. The only ones left were Avrum, his wife, our parents, Yakov's parents and Yakov. Our parents decided they would not run away anymore. But Dad wanted to live. He kept repeating he wanted to see his children again.

Shortly after the second wave of killings, Dad decided to build an underground bunker. He explained the bunker would go from the cellar of the house to the end of the property and have an opening in the adjoining lumberyard. So the group started digging, mostly in the evening, after returning from work and at night; every day another foot, another foot or two. It was back-breaking work, but the group managed to complete quite a bit of the bunker, well hidden in the cellar.

September came, and it became apparent the Germans were preparing to kill the remaining Jews, as they had done with most of the ghetto Jews. One evening, Dad urged Yakov to leave and try to save himself. Yakov ran into the woods on the outskirts of Dubno.

He spent the remaining year and a half with a group of other young Jewish boys and women in the forest, rummaging for food in the fields at night. Wintertime was awful

with cold and illness killing several of the group. Nevertheless, a dozen of them managed to survive until the Russians came in February 1944. The Germans killed the remaining few thousand Jews in October, on *Simchat Torah,* and liquidated the ghetto.

We listened in silence, though Luba cried quietly. I pictured the horror, the torture of my parents and felt throbbing pain. I saw them emaciated and weak, embracing each other as they were awaiting execution. They were as if frozen, yet at peace with each other. I saw them so vividly I thought I could touch them. I felt remorse at not being with Mom and Dad when they needed me most.

"Some way to greet young honeymooners," Sasha interrupted. "Yes, what the Germans did is enough to make you lose your faith in man and hope for the future. But we must go on living and slowly heal the wounds. Let's retire. We'll have plenty of time to talk more tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after."

We got up. I gently embraced Luba. She was shivering. We parted for the night.

The next few days we learned the unbelievable story of Sarah's survival. After the first wave of executions in the spring of 1942, Sarah's parents made arrangements with a Czech family to find shelter for her. One evening, Sarah took a small bundle of belongings and all the money and jewelry her parents had and left the ghetto. The Czech, a business friend of her father's, met her at an appointed place and accompanied her to his home. He introduced her to his wife and an elderly couple who made arrangements for her to stay in the attic of their home. The attic had a little opening which could be reached only by ladder. The couple would deliver to Sarah morning and evening meals and empty her chamberpot. But she was to be absolutely quiet. When she cried, which she did a lot, she was to pack her mouth with a towel. The hardest thing for her was

fighting off loneliness and sadness and keeping her sanity. She lost track of time. Finally in the spring of 1944, she heard commotion and shouting: "The Russians are here."

She was released from her "prison," but there was no one left in Dubno, and there was nothing to do. Her home had been taken over by Ukrainians, and she feared for her life, staying in Dubno. Slowly and dangerously she made her way to Lvov, where she met Sasha.

* * *

A week following the wedding of Luba and Moniek, Joseph and Leena arrived. Joseph was eager to go to Krakow to see his mother and family, and they soon left.

Moniek and Luba and I remained in Lvov for several weeks. During that time, we learned about the death of the Jewish community, the murder of nearly 200,000 Jews through executions and in two death camps near Lvov. Before 1941, Lvov was the largest city in the part of the Ukraine west of the pre-1939 Russian-Polish border. It also had the largest Jewish population, which, between 1939 and 1941, swelled with a large wave of refugees from German-occupied Poland. Barely a few thousand Jews had survived the slaughter.

As I listened to the accounts of this catastrophe, I felt as if I were in a land of insanity. The world must have gone mad. Where did such hatred, such beastliness, come from? I felt as if the air and the earth's soil were all filled with poison, and that we couldn't stay here or anywhere else in Europe.

And yet, I reflected, Luba, Moniek and I and thousands of other Jews did manage to survive in the Soviet Union. Indeed, so many strangers, non-Jews, in Voroshilovograd

and Aksai, in Tashkent, in Sir Daria and in Samarkand were good to us. I felt that the Uzbeks treated me as if I were a part of their family. Were the people of the Soviet Union different than those in Europe? Or did the Soviet culture succeed in raising more tolerant, more responsible citizenry? I wondered.

Despite the calamity, Jewish life began to stir again in Lvov. Jews, who had escaped to Russia ahead of the Germans, began to return, and they began to build a new life, though fragile, in the city. Synagogues and charitable institutions tried feverishly to help returning Jews to find temporary shelter, as well as to reclaim their property. Yet you could feel all these activities were tentative. The basic drive, the basic cry of the survivors was to go to Palestine and build a Jewish home. Their stay in Lvov was temporary and not without fear.

"Beware of the Ukrainians!" people warned us repeatedly. "They were more brutal than the Germans, and they still are. They have stolen Jewish property, and they fear the returning Jews will try to take it back." People also warned us that Jewish life in the smaller towns had been completely extinguished. Furthermore, travel outside of Lvov was dangerous. Ukrainian partisans were roaming the roads and fighting the Russians. They were as eager as ever to kill more Jews. Nevertheless, we decided to return to Dubno.

In late October, Luba, Moniek, and I began our trek home to Dubno. We had planned to go by train, but it was impossible to get permits. We waited at the main road going north from Lvov and waved down a few vehicles. One truck driver agreed to drop us off in Dubno on his way further north to Rovno, as we handed him a sum of money.

It was drizzly and chilly, and it was getting dark when we finally arrived in Dubno. A kilometer or so away was the street where we had once lived. We quickened our pace as we walked through cobbled, empty streets. I had an eerie feeling of emptiness, of nothingness, of death. Soon we reached our street, Berka Yoselevicza, and then 256, our home. It looked worn and shabby, its pink paint all peeled. The brick front entrance was filled with weeds. The little fence was broken.

"Let me knock on the door," Luba volunteered.

We stayed behind as she climbed the few steps and knocked on the door. A few moments later a short, skinny man opened the front door. He took a look at Luba, and he must have recognized she was Jewish.

"What do you want?" he shouted with anger, in Russian with a Ukrainian accent.

"I want to just take a look at the house I used to live in," she said quietly.

The man slammed the door in her face. Luba came down and rejoined us. She had tears in her eyes. I did, too. I had a feeling that the Ukrainians who had taken possession of our home might have helped the Germans in their grisly task of killing my parents. I was choking with anger.

"We better find another place to stay before it gets dark. Let's go to Uncle Avrum's place," Luba said.

Uncle Avrum's home, just a block away from ours was much larger. We arrived and knocked on the front door, expecting another Ukrainian to chase us away. A short, stocky Jewish woman greeted us. We introduced ourselves.

"My name is Rivka Chayat, I am a sister of Gitl Guberman, Avrum's wife," she said inviting us into the living room. She introduced us to her husband, Jacob, "You must

be freezing. It's raining and cold. Come. Let me take your wet coats. Sit down and warm up and let's talk."

We sat on the sofa, next to the coffee table, and Rivka brought us some tea and pastries. We told Rivka and Jacob briefly about our last four years in the Soviet Union. She told us, in turn, about her miraculous survival with a peasant family, her return to Dubno to reclaim her sister's home, and meeting and marrying Jacob. "Unfortunately, there are hardly any Jews left in Dubno. The Germans killed all of them. That includes my sister and her family, as well as your parents and all your parents' relatives. It was an unbelievable disaster. And now I'm not sure whether we should stay here either," she told us.

A hushed silence filled the room. So it was true. The beasts had killed everybody.

Rivka prepared dinner for us and then showed us around the house and invited us to stay in one of the bedrooms. In the morning after breakfast, Rivka took us around town to meet a few other survivors. One of them, Reuben Cantor, had been in the last action when some 5,000 Jews, the remainder of the ghetto, were murdered on October 5, 1942. This action included my parents and family.

Reuben described to us how German soldiers and Ukranian Gendarmes and peasants lined the Jews up at the edge of the ditch. A young German, chain smoking cigarettes, began firing his machine gun, with the victims falling into the ditch. Reuben was wounded in the shoulder, at night, he freed himself from the dying bodies, picked up some clothes and fled into the forest near Dubno. There he joined other partisans who harassed the German supply lines. They would put wooden logs and other heavy objects

on railroad tracks to derail trains, steal arms from German soldiers, and assault small groups of Germans.

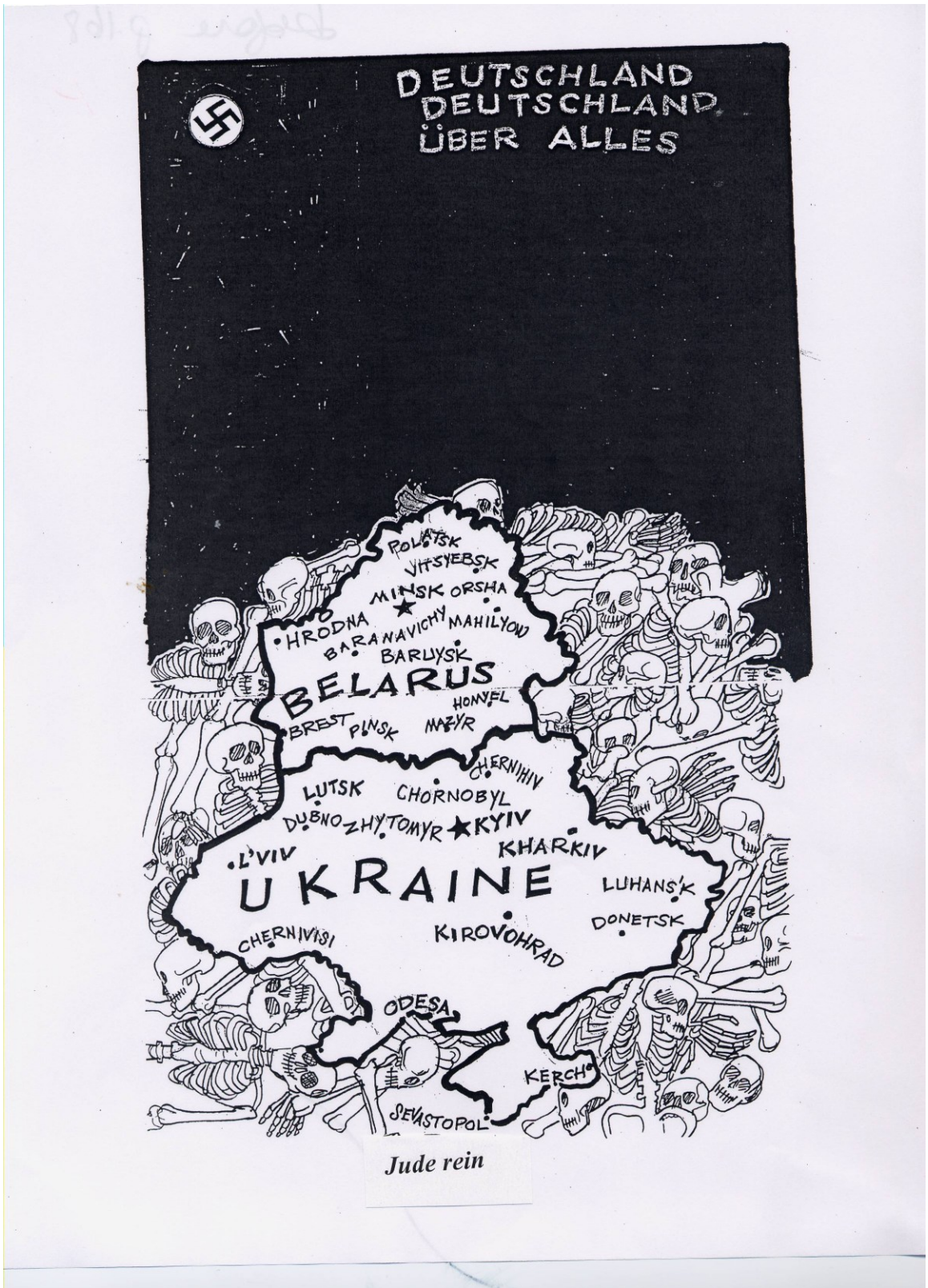
* * *

A few days after our arrival to Dubno, Joseph Gitman came. He was a distant relative on my mother's side and a former suitor of Luba. He was the son of our rabbi and – before the war – he studied to become a rabbi in a famous liberal rabbinic school in Warsaw, called *Tahkemoni.* He had returned home just before the war started and became a teacher in the high school. He had taken a liking to Luba and they saw each other for awhile, but Luba did not care for him. After the German invasion, in June of 1941, Joseph ran away and landed in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. At the end of the war, he made his way to Dubno, taking similar routes to ours.

Joseph found a place to stay with a distant relative, who had survived the war and regained his home. I liked Joseph and felt a kinship with him. We began to spend much time together, interviewing survivors and gathering whatever information we could about the horrors of the war.

One day Reuben said he would go with us to show us the mass graves, the burial of the last "action," which held the remains of Reuben's parents, Joseph's parents, and my parents and relatives. It was November, and the weather, though sunny early in the day, turned drizzly in the afternoon. As we reached the ravine next to Ikva River, a young boy was shepherding a few cows grazing in the lush field.

"Here." Reuben pointed to the place. "Here, look at all the scattered bones. All this area extending for a hundred meters or more is filled with layers and layers of our



Jude rein

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Don Bloom, E. Brunswick, N.J.

martyrs. You see this corner here? That's where I was able to get hold of some rocks and crawl out from the grave."

The little boy shepherd stopped by and looked at us.

"Whose bones are these?" I asked the boy.

"They are bones of wild animals," he said, and went off.

We stood there shocked into silence. The pastoral scene contrasting with the heinous crime jarred my mind. The bucolic quietude clashed with shrieks of men, women, and children being led to their slaughter, which it seemed I heard from the depth of the pit. I felt dizzy and disoriented. I couldn't reconcile my being alive with the deaths of my parents, the deaths of so many, the death of my whole town. I felt chilly and shivering. I was frightened. I pictured being there in the pit with my parents, grandmother, Aunt, and little Henry—being with them all. I felt a bullet piercing my heart and warm blood spilling over my body. Then I pictured shovels of earth, heavy earth over me, sinking me down into the abyss. I was dying, but Mom and Dad were there with me. I felt nausea rise up to my throat, filling my mouth.

We said *Kaddish*, and returned to my uncle's home. I told Luba she had to see the mass grave.

I described to her my visit with Joseph and Reuben, and how I nearly threw up standing on top of the scattered bones and skeletons. I told her how Reuben had managed to crawl out of the grave and survive the war. "You must go and see it for yourself!"

"Mekhel, we must go on living. We cannot afford to die with them. Remember, you're the only Kesler remaining in the world. We must go on," Luba admonished me.

That night, I dreamt my parents were next to me and beyond them were thousands of skeletons. I narrowed my sight on my parents, and saw them as I had so many times since seeing the wounded, dying soldier in Shepetovka. Dad had his throat slashed open and blood was pouring out from his wounds. Dad's eyes were open and looked straight at me, and his lips whispered, "Mekhel, help me." He was so close to me I actually touched him and caressed his hair. And Mom was on his right side, leaning against his shoulder. She was pale, almost white, and she looked so peaceful.

"Mehele, I love you," she whispered to me. "I love you, Mom," I cried out and woke up. I was filled with remorse. Dad had wanted my help. I should have been with him, I should have been with Mom. I should have stayed with my parents. I felt so guilty, so ashamed of letting them down. Who was I to survive while so many, nearly everybody, perished? Guilt and shame kept bombarding me like wild angry bees all day long.

The next day Joseph and I took off to observe what had happened to our town. We went west on Berka Yoselevicza, passing my former home. We soon came to Joseph's home, a brick corner house. He went up the steps and knocked on the door. A woman cracked the door open.

"What do you want?" she asked angrily with a heavy Ukrainian accent.

"This is my home. I just wanted to see it," Joseph said.

The woman slammed the door in Joseph's face.

"No wonder they were so eager to help the Gestapo," Joseph said with a choking voice, "they moved right in, into the homes of the Jews they helped to exterminate." He was livid.

He looked around, and picked up a loose brick and threw it with all his force at the front door, shattering the glass pane. "Let us run!" he exclaimed. His face was white, his lips tight; I had never seen him angry like that. We ran up the hill

On top of the cobbled hill a few blocks away I saw the synagogue, the Great Synagogue. The synagogue had been built a hundred years earlier at the height of Jewish prosperity in Dubno. It was an imposing structure, and being on top of a hill, it could be seen for miles around. Sweet memories came to me of singing in the choir of the famed Chazzan Zalman Sherman. The doors to the synagogue were closed, and there was a sentry at the main entrance.

"What happened to the synagogue?" I asked him.

"It used to be a stable for the Gestapo horses," the sentry said. "Now the town is trying to clean it out and make some use of it."

We turned right. Two blocks away was the *Shtiebel,* the small synagogue where Dad and I used to pray on Saturdays. It was a long wooden structure painted white. Its windows were now shuttered, and the doors were locked and cluttered with broken up plywood.

We turned around and went north towards the center of town, coming to Panienska and Alexandrova, the main commercial street. As we approached the nearest corner, I recognized the building my parents had used as their soft-goods store until the Soviets came in 1939. The building was boarded up; so were all the buildings along the main street. The commercial center of Dubno was not there anymore. It was as dead as the thousands of Jews who had built it, made it alive, and prospered—before the war, before the Soviets came in, before the Germans made it *Judenfrei.*

We continued until we reached the castle, the symbol of Dubno's military prowess of centuries past. It was a massive fort with cannon posts guarding its long perimeter. It was on an island in the Ikva River, and a long bridge led to its entry over a moat. It was a beautiful structure, white with a red ceramic roof.

I pointed to a bench and a table on the high school property overlooking the castle. "Here, Joe, I used to sit for hours after school, painting the castle, the moat and the view of the Ikva."

"I didn't know you were a painter," Joe remarked with some sarcasm.

"Well, I tried to be. You try everything when you're a teenager. Didn't you?"

We went back towards the post office building. I remembered how I would wait there for Sophie on the way to school and then come out to surprise her with a lame excuse that I was dropping off mail. Shortly, we reached the two-story house where Sophie had lived.

"This is where Sophie lived," I told him, "my competitor and the only woman I ever loved, though I don't know whether she loved me. But I'll never forget her." I was choking when I said that.

We crossed the street and opened the small gate to the yard. I knocked on the door. Nobody answered, but I looked through the window and saw the furniture that had been there on the day I parted with Sophie. I went to the next house, where a Polish woman came out. I asked her who lived next door.

"The people who live there moved in a year ago. They came from Russia, and the man works in the post office," she told us.

I wanted to ask her about Sophie and her parents, but I felt there was no use. How would she know about Sophie?

I was in pain. Sophie was so beautiful, so talented, so brilliant, but the brutes didn't care. They killed her, just as they killed all the Jews of Dubno. I wondered what Sophie would have been if she had lived on. She was good in the sciences. Would she have followed in the steps of Maria Sklodowska-Curie?

We went back to my uncle's house.

The next day, I was to meet Joe at my grandmother's house. The house dated back to the early 1800s, when my great, great-grandparents were quite prominent. They were supplying provisions to General Suvorov's army during the Napoleonic Wars. They and their descendents, including my grandmother, were nicknamed Suvorcki. I remembered the hours I spent perusing the files of my grandfather – and possibly of the earlier generations of the Gubermans – of their commercial transactions. They had wide business interest in marketing hops, flour, and grain, in addition to meat.

As I walked there, I remembered the hours I had spent with grandmother, listening to her tales of suffering when grandfather, a lawyer and owner of a number of enterprises, suddenly died, leaving her with two sons and four younger daughters, one of them, Peshia, barely a child.

Joseph arrived and apologized for being late. He had stopped at the town hall to inquire about the fate of his family and their home. They confirmed that his parents, his sister, and younger brother had all been in the ghetto and were all killed. He picked up papers to fill out claims on his home.

We proceeded east to the Jewish cemetery, a kilometer or so away. The cemetery was in complete havoc, with many of the headstones missing and weeds covering most of the tombstones. After a while of walking through the cemetery, Joseph found the tombstone of one of his grandfathers and stopped to say *Kaddish*. We walked back to my uncle's house.

Sophie's fate left a big gap in my findings. How did she perish? I couldn't find anybody who remembered her in the ghetto. Maybe she was exterminated in the first wave, the first "action." Maybe she died of starvation or illness. "So many people died in the ghetto every day, and one couldn't keep track of it," one of the survivors told me.

Another survivor told me about young people who managed to run away into the forests, living like animals. They made their own caves, foraged for food at night, and hid in the caves at daybreak. Some young women, including a classmate of mine, even had babies, hoping their babies would survive even if they would not. It pained me to hear these stories, but I asked for more details like an inebriated drunkard asking for more drinks.

All the inquiries confirmed the bitter reality. Dubno, my hometown, the place I had been born and spent my early teens, was no longer home to me. It was no longer home for any surviving Jew. The very ground we walked on was soaked with the blood of our parents, kin, and relatives. Its environs were filled with the skeletal remains of our murdered brethren. Ukrainians and Poles had stolen our homes and businesses, and they were determined to hold onto their stolen goods. They were full of venom and hate. They were angry that we had survived. It was time to move on.

In the meantime, Luba frantically searched for a buyer of our home and that of Grandmother. She had proof, based on her documents, that she was the legitimate owner of both homes. To my great surprise, she found a Russian businessman interested in the properties. He paid $250 for each house. This was, for us, an unbelievable sum of money.

"Now we have enough to buy our way through the borders and into West Germany," Luba exclaimed gleefully, showing me the crisp U.S. $50 bills.

The next morning we headed to the train station. On our way, we stopped at our home. The Ukrainian man came out. "What do you want now!?" he shouted.

"We sold our home, and we just want to take one last look at it," Luba said calmly.

"Wait a minute," the Ukrainian said. A while later he came out with a pitchfork in his hand, "Get out of here, you dirty Jews, or I'll kill you," he shouted.

We left. We didn't have a chance to see the inside of our home after all but we felt good that the Ukrainians' stay in our home would be short lived - the Russian who had bought our home would surely get rid of him. We went out to the street and stood in front of the house, frozen. It brought back so many memories. The acacia tree was still there, in front of the house, with the little bench around it. Luba used to sit there and read for hours. The yard in the back with the vegetable garden was still there, though hardly visible. Dad and I had spent many hours each spring planting cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, scallions, squash, and sunflowers. We had so much joy seeing things grow and the vegetables ripen. The property had a cherry tree in the corner, from which we picked fruit in competition with the birds. "Be careful climbing too high!" Mom

would admonish me. I remembered it all. I remembered also how I foolishly climbed up on the roof of the garage on the second day of the German war with Russia, to watch German planes pass overhead. They could have strafed me, I thought, now a whole four years older. The house, true, was small and now shabby looking. But it was my home, the place where I was born, the place I spent most of my years growing up.

Joseph Gitman had the unfinished business of selling his parents' property, and he stayed. Luba, Moniek, and I began our trek westward to join Moniek's mother and relatives in Krakow. Our route took us through Lvov again, followed by a train trip to Krakow.

Krakow had the oldest Jewish community in Poland. It dated back to the 14th century when Kazimiesz the Great invited Jewish merchants to help build his commerce. Through the centuries Krakow had become a thriving, vibrant Jewish community of about 100,000 Jews. We arrived in Krakow in mid-December. We went immediately to meet Moniek's mother. Joseph and Leena were there as well; they had arrived a couple of weeks earlier. Moniek's mother, Eva Perlman, was a tall, stately woman with gray hair, an angular face, broad lips, and bright blue eyes. Her face was quite wrinkled, but she looked firm and full of energy and vitality. She lit up when she saw Moniek. Moniek ran towards her, and she embraced him, her face full of smiles and tears. They were in each other's arms for a while, then Moniek introduced us to his mother.

"What a miracle it is to see you all here," Moniek's mother exclaimed. "After so much tragedy, it's wonderful to see my boys, and married too. I can't believe my own eyes, but it's true, thank God. If only your father were here. Unfortunately, he did not

survive and tomorrow will be he his *yahrzeit.* So much has happened. There's so much to tell you," she said, choking with emotion as she left the room.

After awhile, Moniek's mother came back, asked us to wash up, and invited us to the kitchen, where she served us some food. Moniek asked her how she survived the war. "It is an unbelievable story, but miracles did happen, even during this dreadful period," Moniek's mother said as she began her account of the demise of the Krakow Jews. Shortly after entering Krakow, in the fall of 1939, the Germans began to harass the Jews. They picked people at random and beat them or hung them in public. They deprived the Jews of food, seized Jewish property at will, and made life unbearable. In the fall of 1940, they set up a ghetto and crowded in all the Jews in a small area of the city. A few months later, they began to transfer thousands of Jews to a nearby concentration camp at Plaszow.

A German contractor by the name of Oskar Schindler began recruiting Jews from the ghetto to work in his factory. He supplied strategic goods and had many connections with top German authorities in Krakow. Moniek's cousin, Regina, was among the first that Schindler had employed as his secretary. She had succeeded in convincing Schindler to select Moniek's mother, his uncles and a few of the cousins to work in his factory. Schindler saved about 3,000 Jews that way, and a good part of Moniek's family among them. Moniek's mother was assigned to sew military uniforms.

"And what happened to Dad?" Moniek asked.

"The Germans had taken your father and other men out to work in a factory twenty or so miles away from Krakow before Schindler came into the picture. From

there, he was sent to another factory, then became ill and died," Moniek's mother answered.

Moniek continued with questions about life in the ghetto, the fate of their relatives and friends, the daily life of Schindler's workers and the fate of most of the Jews of Krakow. The conversation went on for many hours. I couldn't follow most of it, since it dealt with people whom I did not know. However, it was clear to me that the Jews of Krakow had suffered the same fate as the Jews of Lvov and Dubno, with almost all of them killed.

Moniek's mother lived in a small apartment consisting of two small bedrooms in addition to the kitchen. She set up one of the bedrooms as quarters for the three of us. Joseph and Leena found a small place nearby to stay in.

The next day, we met Regina, the cousin who had saved nearly half of the Perlman family, while working as a secretary for Mr. Schindler. She was a beautiful woman in her early 30s: tall, slim, and vivacious with large blue eyes and blond hair. She exuded confidence and cheer, and she was easy to speak with. She filled in details about Oskar Schindler, "He was temperamental, often drunk and difficult to work with," Regina remarked, "he was a good man and saving Jews became his obsession. He saved many who would have otherwise perished."

As the day went on, Moniek's mother and Regina told us more details about the Perlmans and the Jewish community in Krakow. Before the war, Krakow had many Hasidic sects. The Perlmans belonged to, and were prominent members of, the Bobov sect. It was a large family, closely bound by belief and Hasidic tradition. They had

suffered heavy losses. Those who survived rejoined as a warm devoted family, eager to start a new life.

Later in the day another cousin visited us, Naftali. He and his younger brother, Aaron, had spent several years in the Mathausen Concentration Camp, where they nearly perished from starvation and illness. Naftali was in his 40s, a stout man with a round face and mischievous eyes. He was full of good humor and funny stories. I liked him immediately. He was on a mission to help as many Jews as possible leave Poland for Germany.

Very few Jews had survived the catastrophe. And, Poland had no use for them. The Poles - like the Ukrainians in the East - had appropriated Jewish property, and they were determined to hold onto it. Meanwhile, news spread that West Germany, particularly the part occupied by the U.S., had "porous borders" and provided refuge for the Jewish survivors. The Joint Distribution Committee sponsored efforts to help the survivors escape from Poland to Germany, and Naftali was one of many agents facilitating that task.

A week after our arrival, Naftali arranged for us to leave Krakow through Czechoslovakia. Towards the end of December, Moniek's mother, Joseph, Leena, Moniek, Luba and I crossed the Polish-Czech border at Szchechin. From there we took a train to Prague, where we stayed overnight. The next day, on Christmas Eve, we went to a small border town across the river from Hoff, Germany. Naftali's friends explained to us that Christmas Eve would be a good time to cross the river, since most of the border guards would be celebrating the holiday with their families. The friends also arranged for guides to actually carry us across the shallow waters of the river. At midnight, Christmas

morning, we arrived in the U.S. Occupation Zone in West Germany, and later that day traveled by train to Munich. We were safe!

Chapter 10: Living Midst the Vanquished -

The Displaced Person

Where Shall I Go?

Where shall I go with all the gates shut?
Where shall I go with all exit roads cut?
Can you hear my fervent plea?
This poison place I must flee,
but wherever I'd go, they'd trample on me!
Can you see? Can't you see?

(A Yiddish Song of the Holocaust Era)

The day after Christmas in 1945, Luba, Moniek, Moniek's mother and several cousins and I arrived at the Displaced Persons' Camp in Landsberg am Lech, about 20 kilometers northwest of Munich, in the U.S. occupation zone of Germany. Landsberg was famous for its prison which housed Adolph Hitler in the early 1920s. It is where Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf,* with its manifesto to exterminate the Jews.

The Displaced Persons Camp was under the auspices of United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA). The approximately 5,000 residents of the camp were Jewish survivors of the war. Most of them had survived the tortures and horrors of concentration camps. Some of them, like us, had survived the war in the Soviet Union and made their way to the Displaced Persons Camp as well as to other DP camps scattered throughout Western Germany. We were all homeless and stateless. Homelessness was the first requirement for being able to register in the camp.

The camp had housed, in the past, a military unit of the German *Wehrmacht.* It contained many barracks scattered over several acres, and it included recreational

facilities. The military compound stood apart from the main town where the civilian, German population lived, and we were advised to stay within the compound.

Luba, Moniek, and I were assigned one large room in the barracks. Luba got a moving partition, and arranged for a small area in one corner of the room to be my "new home," as she called it sarcastically. A small cot, and a nightstand and a lamp made up my furnishings. Luba and Moniek had a much larger bed and a table in the middle of their part of the room, a small stand for a mini electric stove, and a sink with running water next to it. The toilet and a couple of showers were down the hall, shared with a number of occupants in other rooms.

UNRRA supplied us with blankets, sheets, pillows, towels, and with daily rations of food. Food, however, was a problem, at least initially. Moniek and Luba were eating strictly kosher food. This meant that we lived on protein from canned tuna and eggs until kosher meat and chicken products arrived, courtesy of the American Joint Distribution Committee (JOINT), in response to the clamor of Orthodox Jews.

Luba began to teach in the new camp school. Moniek was busy working on a new design for an electric razor that he had invented. I enrolled in a course to be given in February by Organization for Rehabilitation and Training (ORT), to study radio repair. We began to function as a family unit.

In late January, I developed a high fever and was admitted into the camp hospital. Although fever subsided, I was weak and lethargic. The nightmares of seeing and touching my bleeding, dying father kept recurring. I pictured being with my whole family, crowded in our two-room home, sharing morsels of stale bread and spoonfuls of water. Where did they get water? I thought with alarm, surely the Germans did away with

water carriers. I imagined holding Mom in my arms and wiping her tears, and then trying to cheer my sad Dad with the songs I sang at the Great Synagogue on the high holidays. I felt I was with them as the Gestapo chased them out of their home into the streets with wild dogs and wild Ukranians, clubbing them and forcing them into columns, and then marching them to the outskirts of the town. I felt I was with them as they were digging their own graves. I wanted to have been with them so much to help them undress for death. I felt myself clinging to them as they were hit by bullets, bleeding and falling into the grave, into the abyss.

I felt guilt and shame for abandoning my parents. Who was I to survive, while they and so many others had died? My nightmares of deserting the Soviet army, which had diminished with time, reappeared and haunted me, making me feel like a traitor, small and feeble. I also felt lonely. Luba now belonged to another man and I had no one in the world who cared for me. My will to live began to crumble.

I feared the future. If Einstein and Freud, and numerous other Jewish Nobel laureates as well as the gift of monotheism to the world could not save European Jewry, what hope was there for those of us remaining? What was the purpose of surviving in a jungle of beastliness and hostility?

A young nurse appeared for night duty on our ward, and slowly lifted my depression. Stefa Aronowicz was slim and tall, a bit taller than I. She had blond hair, blue eyes, a beautiful face, a soft smile and mellifluous voice. She was gentle, but she moved and spoke with authority. She listened patiently as I explained about my nightmares and doubts. She gently reminded me how lucky we were to be alive, how thankful we should be for surviving this horrific period of human history.

One evening with her chores done, Stefa came and sat down on my bed.

"Meesha, you know, there's nothing pathologically wrong with you. The doctor noted some weakness of your heart muscle and what he calls mild depression. Both of these symptoms tell me, as a nurse, that you're overwhelmed with worry and self-punishment. I remember what you told me, and I can understand how you feel. I thought it might help you if I tell you the story of another survivor, myself. Promise you'll listen carefully?"

"Yes, I'll listen. I thank you very much for spending time with me," I said.

Stefa told me her parents and almost all of her family died during those horrible years. Her brother, whose whereabouts she didn't know, and she were the only ones who survived the war. Stefa, her parents and brother lived in an exclusive area of Warsaw. She attended a Catholic school. Soon after the Germans' arrival in September 1939, they forced all Jews to wear the yellow armband with the Star of David, and began rationing food. They also started vicious, public beatings of Jews and public hangings of Jews.

In November of 1940, the Germans formed a ghetto and forced all Jews to move into it. There were over 300,000 Jews, one-third of the total population of Warsaw, and the ghetto they were driven into was just a few streets, a tiny fraction of the total area of the city. Conditions in the ghetto were unbearable. Several families were packed together into one tiny apartment. The food rations were being gradually cut to the starvation level. Stefa and her family were a bit luckier than the others. Her dad had managed to sell his business soon after the Germans came in, and he had converted some of the money into gold coins, which enabled the family to barter for extra food.

Hunger, typhoid, and all sorts of illnesses began to decimate the ghetto. The Germans announced opportunities for young Jews to work in the East, where food was plentiful. Hundreds of young men signed up and were taken away. Months passed and there was no word from any of these men. People became suspicious that something terribly wrong was happening. Rumors had spread the disappearing young men were gassed at Treblinka, one of many death-camps built by the Germans.

A few Jews did escape and come back to tell what was happening. Some Jews also formed an underground and had connections with partisan groups outside the city. Stefa's parents decided her brother should leave the ghetto. He joined the underground, disappeared, and wasn't heard from again.

A few months later, her dad obtained false papers for Stefa and the name of a Cloister Convent. She looked Polish and acted like a Polish woman, having spent ten years in a Catholic school. In January 1943, just a few months before the ghetto was exterminated, she ran away, leaving her parents and grandparents and dozens of uncles and cousins behind. She found the Cloister Convent in a small village a few kilometers from Warsaw. During the next year and a half, she lived as if she were a Catholic nun.

In the convent, she was assigned to study to be a nurse in a neighboring hospital. The war was raging, the Germans were retreating, and they brought in a lot of wounded soldiers. Nurses took care of all the wounded, since many of the doctors had been mobilized. "I learned nursing real fast, and I loved the profession," she said. "Now, Meesha, I must go and take care of a few chores. Some other time, I'll tell you the rest of the story. Go to sleep and have a good night's rest." She caressed my face and left.

Stefa's story touched me. She too had lost her parents, relatives and all she had possessed. She had lived through more horrors than I had. Yet, she survived and was full of will to go on and live. Shouldn't I do the same? Stefa was so easy to listen to, I thought. She was so easy to identify with.

I slept well that night. I awoke in the morning refreshed as if some of the awesome burdens began to lift off my shoulders.

Stefa began to fill me with hope.

"Don't worry so much, Meesha," she would admonish me. "If you and I could survive the catastrophe, we are surely destined to live. Stop being a philosopher, and stop worrying so much. Live a little, have a little fun," she said and smiled. Her good humor and sunny personality stirred a new life in me.

A few days after Stefa had introduced herself to me, the doctor came in to tell me the good news: "Herr Kesler, I am discharging you today. You've made a good recovery, and I don't want to see you here, for a while, anyway."

"So, what was the matter with me, Herr Doctor?" I asked in broken German. My knowledge of Yiddish was the closest language to German I knew.

"I'll be speaking slowly, German; it's the only language I know. Is it all right?" he asked.

"Yes, Herr Doctor."

"You had a bad cold, and you had a hard time recovering from it. Your heart developed some weakness. Your heart lost some muscle, probably as a result of trauma."

He read that I had lost my family. He understood how I felt about the tragedy. He explained there was a price one pays for too much worry and too much grief. They affect

one's vagus nerve that controls blood circulation to the heart. Excessive fear makes the vagus nerve constrict blood circulation. There was a little irony in this he stated, a bad design of the system. Just when the heart needs to pump faster to provide more blood to the brain and body so one can fight the causes of fear, the vagus nerve does the opposite. This is often the cause of heart attacks in older people.

"Your heart muscles did suffer a bit of damage but you're young and I hope time will heal it. So I wish you a good recovery and good luck," he concluded.

He shook my hand, and he left. He was a kind man, a good man, and German, I reflected. There are good Germans, after all…

* * *

I rejoined Luba and Moniek, after three weeks in the hospital. Later that afternoon I went to town, found a flower shop, and bought a dozen red roses. I came back to our barracks, found a vase, filled it with water, and put the flowers in it. I hid the vase with the flowers in the bushes under our window. The next morning I took the flowers and went to the hospital to wait for Stefa. Shortly after 8 a.m. she came out, still full of vivacity despite a night's work.

"Here, Stefa," I greeted her. "I brought you some flowers, just to tell you thank you for all you have done for me."

She was startled. She took the flowers but reproached me gently, "You shouldn't have done it." She embraced the flowers, as if they were a person, and smelled the aroma of the roses. "My, my, you must have spent a fortune. Did you inherit some money?" She took me by the hand and we walked all the way to her barracks.

"You want to come in and meet my roommate?" she asked. I obliged.

The room was familiar, the same as ours, and a partition separated her bed from that of her roommate.

"Hello Basia! Meet my patient." She called to a short, dark-haired woman, in her 30s, and said to me, "Come, Meesha, let's have some coffee. I have to wake up or else I'll fall asleep."

I shared some buns and coffee with Stefa and Basia as well as some small talk, and then left. I was distracted all day. Stefa was on my mind. I've got to see her. I've got to see her, I thought.

In the evening I waited near Stefa's apartment, hoping to see her. She must be leaving for work at this time, I thought. She was startled when she saw me.

"I was just taking a walk," I said sheepishly.

She smiled. "The strange ways of young men to accost woman on their way to work," she laughed. As we walked toward the hospital, she told me about her correspondence with relatives in the U.S. "Maybe I'll get lucky and get some papers to go to America. That would be something, wouldn't it, Meesha?"

"We're all waiting for miracles, and miracles do happen," I said.

We reached the hospital all too soon. "Well, good evening, Meesha. I must go in to work. I hope to see you sometime, when I'm not in such a hurry. Maybe the day after tomorrow, Sunday. Will you come?"

"I will, for sure," I answered.

I was as if lifted above ground, way above the camp, floating in space, away from the haunting past. I thought about Sophie. It had been so long ago, five years since we parted amidst the bombings. I remembered how I used to wait to meet her as she was

walking to school. I remembered too how shy I was and tongue-tied when we did meet. Would I be as shy with Stefa? "Why are you so timid, Mekhel? Don't be afraid of me," Sophie had told me. I became a bit apprehensive.

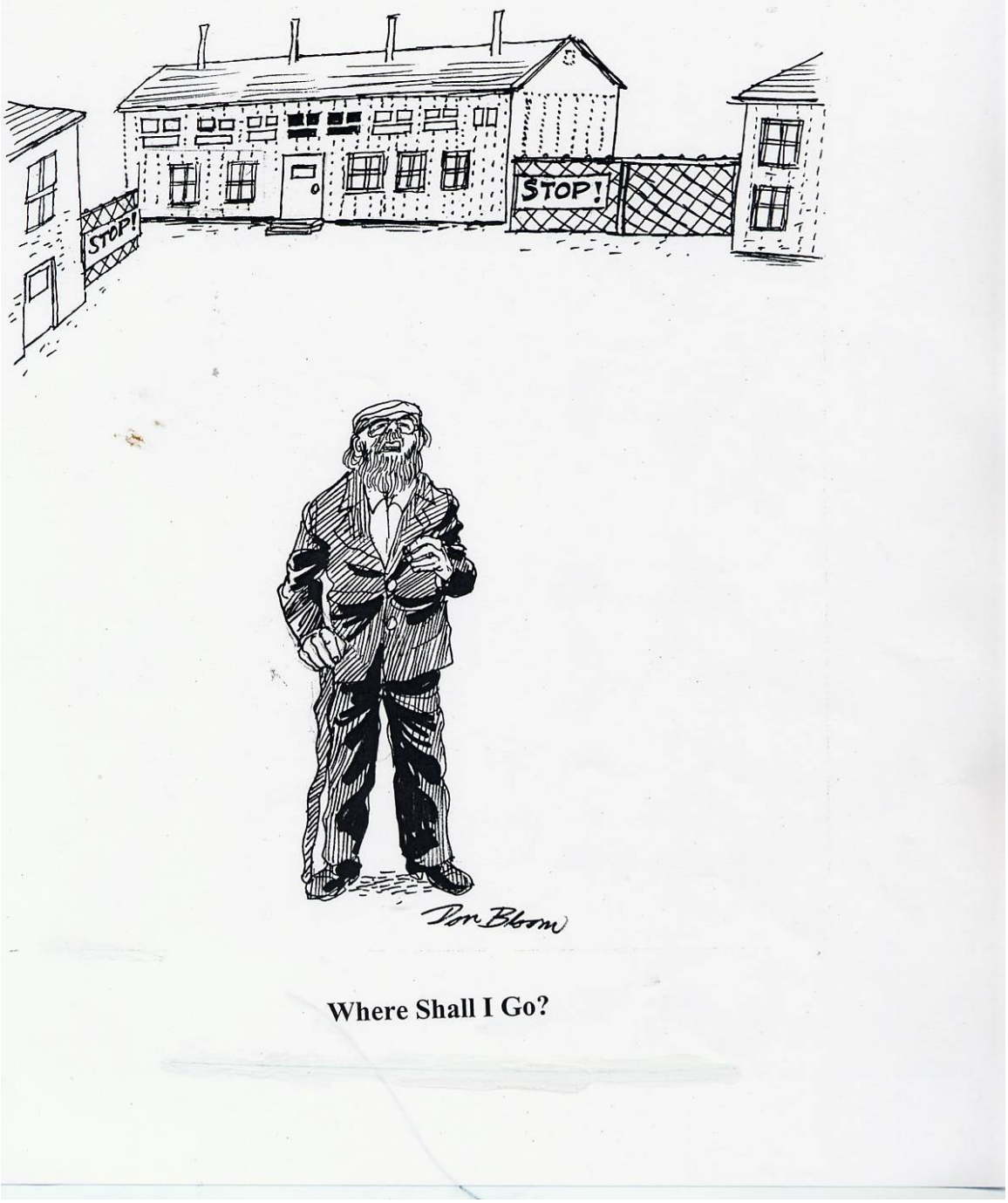
The radio technicians' course had started a week earlier, and I had some catching up to do. The instructor was a young German, in his 30s, who lived in town a kilometer or so away from the camp. He taught us how to assemble a radio from simple components, and how to improve it by adding new components. He also taught us the principles of radio transmission and basic electronics. The course was scheduled for six months.

There were twenty-two of us young Jewish men and women in the course. Most of the students were survivors of the death camps; a few of them had escaped to Russia and came to the Displaced Persons' Camp after serving in the Soviet Army. The stories of their survival made me look up to them. My experiences were so benign, so puny compared to theirs. I had Luba to protect me, almost like a mother, but they were left to their own devices. I was shy and restrained about sharing my life and my feelings with them. I felt one step removed from their horrific pasts.

I did become close to Henry Kohen, a survivor of Auschwitz, where he had lost his whole family. Henry was short, had black hair, and wore dark-rimmed glasses. Our experiences were indeed different, but we shared the zest to learn, our views for the need to leave Europe, and our hopes for a better future. He was gentle and easy to be with. He confided to me that he had an extremely rich aunt in Florida and that she was trying to send him papers to come to the U.S.

The state of our lives--Moniek's, Luba's and mine--in the camp began to weigh heavily on me. We had enough to eat—certainly more than during the last five years—and we had a roof over our heads. But we had no place to go, no hope of leaving the camp. I began to feel anger tearing me apart. Anger at the Germans, anger at the Ukrainians and the Poles, anger at the world that had known of Hitler's extermination of the Jews and did nothing to stop it, and anger at the world intent on keeping us, the few survivors, locked up. The news over the radio and in the press added to my anger. Gen. George Patton, the U.S. military hero who broke Rommel's advance in North Africa, began to issue Nazi-like proclamations against the Jews in the camps. Bevan, Great Britain's new Secretary of State, was openly hostile to the Jews, and Britain imposed strict restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine. The British navy intercepted boats with Jews heading to Palestine and diverted them to Cyprus. There they set up interment camps for the Jews. It looked like we, the survivors, would continue languishing in camps for a long time.

I kept seeing Stefa as often as she could see me; she was assigned to the evening shift at the hospital, and I waited impatiently to see her on her way to work in the evening. Some evenings, we went to the cafeteria and spent time together before she had to run off to work. She was vivacious, funny, cheerful, and good to me. She began to fill my days and nights with hopes and dreams. I would wake in the morning with memories of seeing her the evening before, and waves of warmth and comfort would sweep over me, like the waves of the Ikva River near Dubno on a hot summer day. More than that I felt an overwhelming sweetness and joy transport me to the woods of Dubno where we had spent a few summer vacations, with family. Now I was with alone in the woods with



Where Shall I Go?

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Don Bloom, E. Brunswick, N.J.

Stefa. She was near me. I could almost touch her close to me, stretched under the pine trees, caressing her eyes and warm lips. I felt as if I was melting down with pleasure and joyfulness.

One evening I saw her at a distance on her way to work. She looked radiant and beautiful in the setting sun with her warm smile greeting me from afar. I heard my heart pounding. I was excited to see her. She came close and I took her warm hand in mine. I was trembling.

"Why are you trembling, Meesha?" she asked gently.

"Because I like you, I like you so much."

"So, is that any reason to tremble? Don't be so afraid, I'm not going to hurt you, you know," she reproached me, as she burst out laughing. We approached the clinic. She hugged me and gave me a gentle kiss on my face and entered the clinic.

Stefa's words lingered on in my mind. "Don't be afraid, I'm not going to kill you, you know." I thought she was right. I loved her very much, but I was afraid of really coming close to her. She was a beautiful, confident woman. She was an accomplished nurse. She came from a rich, seemingly aristocratic family. I had no profession, and meager outlooks for getting one. Surely, I could be a weaver, or a radio technician or a veterinary assistant – but that was no way to support a family. I had dreams of being a scientist or an engineer, but how would I achieve that if I would get married? I had little confidence in myself or my abilities. Was I deserving of Stefa? I began to have some doubts, as I had had with Sophie, five years earlier. The intervening years may have increased my ability to fight for survival, but not my skills to court and get a mate, I reflected.

In early March, Luba announced she was pregnant. I was ecstatic to hear the news. After so many tragedies, it was time to celebrate the expectation of a new life. I was trying to spend more time with Luba, helping her with housekeeping chores. Yet our relationship began to diminish in intensity. She and Moniek were drawing closer together, and I was beginning to be left out of their thinking, their plans, and their discussions. They often talked in hushed voices, as if trying to hide things from me. I was beginning to feel apart from them and alone in the world. Luba had another man, a better man; she no longer had need for me, I thought. Another matter began to push us apart: religion.

Moniek and his family belonged to the Bobover, an ultra-Orthodox, Hasidic sect. It was named after the leader of the sect, who came from Bobov, a small town near Krakow, Poland. I began to feel uncomfortable in that environment. Orthodox Judaism is built on a pillar of strict belief in a personal God, a God who predetermines the destiny of people, the destiny of each person, and is present in each person, all the time. I kept asking questions: Was God present in Hitler when he committed his monstrous crimes? Did God predetermine the construction of gas chambers and crematoria to exterminate innocent people? I couldn't believe that. Orthodox Judaism firmly believed that God has chosen the Jewish people and favored them with special love and attention. That notion did not square with the near annihilation of European Jewry.

Orthodox Jews believed in the sanctity of the Sabbath and its strict observance in accordance with laws codified more than fifteen hundred years earlier, under living conditions drastically different from the present.

"Don't touch the electric switches on the Sabbath!" Moniek admonished me with anger. "Don't use the bicycle on the Sabbath!" Moniek scolded. "You can't carry anything on the street on the Sabbath!" Moniek reproached me. Do this, and don't do that irritated and stifled me. Life had been terribly constrained in the Soviet Union. Here I had felt finally free and unbound, and I rebelled against new yokes imposed on me, albeit in the name of religion.

My antipathy towards Orthodoxy led to an angry confrontation with Moniek and his cousins. Moniek persuaded me to attend Bobover services on a Saturday that coincided with the beginning of a lunar month. On such occasions, traditional prayer books provide special prayers, including a phrase "because we and our fathers have sinned, our city was destroyed." A senior, bearded and obviously revered member of the congregation sermonized on the Sabbath. He singled out the quoted text for special comments: "We and our fathers have sinned, in our own time as well, and God punished us with the tragedies that had befallen us." He continued to excoriate those who have turned away from God. "The redemption of all Jews will take place only when Jews return to God," he concluded. That sermon upset and offended me; I became angry.

We returned to our apartment. Soon Moniek's cousins joined us for refreshments. I expressed my astonishment to Moniek at the old man's linking of the Holocaust with sins of the Jews, in a voice loud enough to be heard by all assembled. Moniek reproached me, "You're too critical and too quick to judge people." I answered heatedly that I did not think my parents were sinners, nor were the six million innocent Jews murdered by the Germans. I thought it was a crime, and an offense to the memory of those who perished for anybody to make such accusations. The cousins joined in the

quarrel. "You must not question the ways of God," one of them said. "A God who would send people to crematories is no God for me!" I shouted, enraged, and stormed out of the room. I felt hurt and bitter. I also felt estranged. I concluded that I could no longer stay with Luba and Moniek.

The DP camps were blessed with many visitors from America as well as Palestine, who gave us encouraging lectures and promises. Talk is cheap, I often thought after listening to famed visitors address us, speaking of attempts to find new homes for us. Indeed, very few U.S. consulates were open, and the open ones were soon flooded with applicants.

In late March, David Ben Gurion, the head of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, came to Landsberg to deliver an address in the main hall. I arrived early, excited, and full of anticipation. I had read some of Ben Gurion's speeches and pamphlets, and thought he was a man of action. Soon he came on stage, a short, chubby man, of elf-like stature, with white hair sprouting out from the periphery of his large, mostly bald head. He had facial features of a Ukrainian and lively exciting eyes.

He began to speak with a voice as loud as that of a lion, and I listened to him with rapture. "I'm here to tell you that we will win our independence!" Ben Gurion exclaimed. He went on to assure us that the Jews in Palestine will defeat the British and will build a new life, a new nation, and that its technological advances will be the envy of all nations. One day the new Jewish homeland will become the Switzerland of the Middle East. "We want all of you to join us in our struggle and in the building of our new nation. We want you young people to join the kibbutzim that are looking for volunteers here, and at every DP Camp. Join a kibbutz! Learn a trade! And in due time we'll see you in our new

That evening I visited one of the *kibbutzim*, *Hashomer Hatzayir*. The *kibbutz* was one of many in the DP camps, set up by the mother organizations in Palestine to attract and prepare surviving young Jews for work in Palestine. *The kibbutz* occupied nearly half of a barrack and had more than 100 young people. It was liberal in character, as it was sponsored by a left-of-center political party in Palestine. That suited me just right. I registered and went back to see Luba and Moniek. I told them of my decision to join the *kibbutz*.

Moniek was quite upset. "You don't have much respect for Judaism and your past," he said with bitterness. Luba intervened.

"Mekhel, we have good news to celebrate, so let us not get hung up on silliness."

"What is it, Luba?"

"Remember Aunt Leha in Uruguay?" Luba reminded me that the aunt and her husband, Yoyne, and two daughters and her sister, Miriam, had left for Uruguay in 1933. Aunt Leha and her family live in Montevideo, where they have a candy factory, while Miriam is practicing her nursing profession. Uruguay has no quotas on immigrants, and Aunt Leha wants us to come there.

"That's unbelievable," I said. "How did she find us?"

"It's I who found them." Luba said with pride. "I wrote to them a month or so ago, and now I have an answer." She got up, reached for the letter, and gave it to me. It was written in Yiddish and was warm and welcoming. They really wanted us to come.

"Will you join us?" Luba asked me after I read it.

"I've just joined the *kibbutz.* I don't know where this will lead me. I may be going to Palestine soon."

The next morning I took my few belongings and went to the *kibbutz*. The *kibbutz* assigned me to a room with three other young men. It was a bit crowded, but we didn't spend much time in our rooms. All of us worked or studied during the day, and in the evening we shared our meals in a big hall. Each of us took turns preparing or serving the meals. Friday evenings were special. The big hall would be decorated with flowers and plastic tablecloths, a bottle of wine on each table, and the meal was sumptuous: chicken with vegetables, salad, and dessert. The evening would start with song and end with song, fiery Zionist songs. We always had a speaker; most often it was one of us, but sometimes it was a visiting dignitary from the U.S. or Palestine. Thus we welcomed and celebrated the Sabbath, not with prayer, or religious ritual, but with excitement and joy. We were drawn together by common experience, common hopes, and dreams. It felt good to be alive.

The Passover holiday filled me with pride and happiness I hadn't known since before I left home. I had begun writing poems and songs, some full of sadness from the past, but others ringing with nationalistic fervor.

I prepared a poem for the first night's *Seder*. I read the poem and was followed by the famed poet Levik, who was visiting with us. Levik was a writer for the *Forward* newspaper. He took my poem and promised to have it published in the paper. I was excited and proud. At the *Seder*, we had the Manischewitz *Haggadahs*. I remembered the long hours we spent at home reading the *Haggadah,* with Father adding commentary on the text. This Seder was different: It had very little reading of the text but a lot of singing

and commentaries by survivors. All of the comments and speeches ended with a strong commitment to life and affirmation about being free in our new homeland. Yes, it was a miracle to have survived, and it was wonderful to be alive and to be free—although we were not entirely free.

At the end of May, bad news reached us at the ORT course. One of the attendees, Peter, had returned a month earlier to his hometown, Kielce. He had given up waiting to go to his relatives in the U.S. or of ever leaving the camp for the West or for Palestine. He complained often that he felt as he had in Auschwitz, except for the ovens and the gas chambers. He was angry. He had had enough and was going back to claim his home. Alas! On May 26, a violent pogrom erupted in Kielce, and 50 Jews who had returned were killed. Peter was one of them. We mourned and cried, and we confirmed our determination never to return to Poland. There was only one place for us: Palestine, a new home in Palestine!

That evening, I saw Stefa, just as she was heading to work. I had to share with her the bad news. Stefa listened and became upset. "I'm glad I had left that god-forsaken place and its horrible people."

"What are you going to do, Stefa?" I asked.

"I'm getting impatient waiting as well. I don't know when the U.S. will open its doors to us. Meanwhile, there is no way to apply for a visa, even if I receive the papers from Aunt and Uncle. Anyway, let's talk about it. How about Sunday?

"I'll see you then," I said, and gently kissed her cheek.

We had a small breakfast. Then Stefa said. "I've got an idea, Meesha. I'll prepare a couple of sandwiches, and we'll go for a hike in the woods. Do you like that idea?"

"I love it."

Soon we were on our way. I held her hand as we walked, and it felt so good. Stefa was cheerful, telling me funny stories, and bursting out with laughter at her own stories. The day was beautiful. The sky was blue and cloudless. The pathways in the woods were filled with new blossoms, new growth, and new life. We reached a large clearing where fresh grass was still covered with beads of dew. Stefa opened her bag and took out a blanket.

"Help me, Meesha, to put out the blanket. Let's rest."

We lay down. Stefa turned towards me and put her hand on my cheek. "Remember what I told you, in the hospital, about my war years? I promised to tell you more someday. Well, there's more that I want you to know now."

In the fall of 1944, Stefa told me, when Poland was liberated by the Russians, she fled the convent and returned to Warsaw. Her family was gone, and so were all the Jews of the ghetto. She returned to the apartment where they had lived before the catastrophe and resumed her work as a nurse in a neighboring hospital. She was lonely and her spirit was broken. She tried to make new friends with the nurses in the hospital, yet she felt estranged. "They were not my friends. They couldn't be my friends. The Poles could have saved so many Jews. They could have saved my parents. So many of them had stolen Jewish property and settled comfortably in Jewish homes. I really could no longer feel this was my country," she said. We rested for awhile and then she resumed her story.

At the end of the war, her brother appeared. She was very happy to have him back in her life and he moved in with her. But he was a changed, strange man. After his escape from the ghetto, he lived in forests with other escapees. He had nearly starved to

death, and several times was almost caught by the SS. Several of his comrades were caught, and the SS executed them. He lived like an animal on the run, and his spirit was broken.

One night Stefa's brother came to her bedroom and wanted to rape her. She fought him off. In the morning, she packed her things and left. She rented a small apartment near the hospital. A young Polish doctor named Janusz took a liking to her and began to pursue her. She was lonely, and she gave in to his advances. They became lovers. "But I was torn inside," Stefa said. "Janusz was good to me, and I suppose I loved him, but I felt disloyal to my parents, family, and my people. I also felt that Warsaw was soaked with Jewish blood, and as if I was walking on the graves of my people." A few months later, in October 1945 she left Poland. She had heard about the Displaced Persons' Camp in Germany. She told Janusz about her decision and they parted. "He was tearful and in pain, but he understood me. He was a good man."

"How did you manage to come to Germany? We had a hard time crossing borders. Did you?" I asked.

Stefa explained that she had her false papers as a Polish woman when she had fled the ghetto. The papers made it easy for her to get to Czechoslovakia. From there, she traveled illegally to Austria and later to the Landsberg D.P. Camp, where she resumed her work as a nurse. "So you see, Meesha, you're in good company. All the people here, not only I, have gone through hell. And we survived. We are alive, and that's what counts most. We can't fix the past. Let's do something about the future, our future."

Stefa rested for awhile. I was touched by her story, by her sincerity and openness with me. But I was also taken aback; she had lived with another man, a Polish man. My

mind drifted to Sophie. She was very much like Stefa, but she was so much closer to my dreams, unspoiled by the horrors of war.

Stefa turned to me. "Do you like me, Meesha?"

"Yes, I do, very much."

After awhile, Stefa continued, "And Meesha, do you love me?"

"I do, Stefa, with all my heart. I think of you, I dream of you, and I want to be with you. I think you're beautiful, and you have a wonderful soul."

"Then why are you so shy with me?"

I did not answer, and Stefa burst out, with a bit of disappointment in her voice. "Meesha, have you ever loved another woman?"

"Yes, I did," I replied and began to tell her about Sophie.

"I don't think you understand me," she said angrily. "Did you ever have sex with another woman? I mean, have you heard about the birds and the bees?"

Stefa was now full of sarcasm and anger. I was taken by surprise; I had never seen Stefa angry. I felt as if I had been slapped on the face, and was quiet. Stefa didn't wait much. "Let's go back," she said as she got up.

I helped her pack and fold the blanket, and we went back to her apartment. Stefa was quiet on the way back, and I knew she was hurt; she felt rejected. We parted. I was upset. I had behaved like a fool, like a little boy, just as I had in the army. I better grow up, I thought.

A few days later Basia saw me in the cafeteria. "Meesha, I want to talk to you."

She asked, "How would you like to come to Munich? I can buy tickets to see the

opera, and you, Stefa, and I could spend the evening together. I have a small apartment there, and you and Stefa could stay over as well."

I was delighted to accept her invitation. A couple of days later, Basia saw me again. "I got tickets for Wagner's Lohengrin. Do you like Wagner?" she asked.

"Not very much, but Lohengrin I can take anytime. I like the whole idea of being with you and Stefa. You're great. Thank you very much."

"We have to catch the bus next Saturday at 9 a.m. See you there then," Basia said and bid me goodbye.

The following Saturday, in early June, the three of us boarded the bus to Munich. We arrived in Munich, a thriving city, the largest city I had ever seen. So many people! So much traffic and, so much destruction all around. Rubble filled every street, with many buildings leveled to the ground. Some buildings were standing like skeletons with barely a wall or two remaining as shadowy reminders of their existence. We had a quick bite and went to the Munich Museum of Art where we spent most of the afternoon. We had supper, and then rushed to the Opera House.

Lohengrin is a four-act opera, beautiful, emotional, and long. We got to Basia's apartment past midnight. It was a small room with a bed, a couch, a little table with a couple of chairs, and a tiny stand for an electric oven. The washroom was down the hall.

"Well, young people, it's time to go to sleep," Basia said. "You, Meesha, can sleep crouched on the couch, or comfortably on the bed with Stefa. Which shall it be?"

"I vote for Stefa, that is, if Stefa doesn't object."

"You are cordially invited," Stefa said, laughing.

We got into bed together, and Stefa was there, next to me. I knew she was awake. I was full of turmoil and conflict. I loved her but I was afraid of her. I knew that if I made love to her, I would commit myself to marrying her, to being with her forever, but I was so unsettled. I might be going to Palestine any day, and she might be leaving for the U.S. If I insisted on going to Palestine, would she come with me? I had never discussed this with her. And how would I make a living? How would I support a family if she did agree to come with me? I tossed and turned, and later, much later, fell asleep.

When we got up in the morning, Stefa was quiet, except for a few words with Basia. Basia prepared breakfast, and soon we were bound back to Landsberg. I didn't see Stefa until the following Saturday at a dance in the public hall. She was at a table with Basia and another young man.

Basia noticed me and came to me. "Meesha, I would like to talk to you. When are you free?"

"Any evening will do," I answered.

We agreed to meet the following evening, and next day we met in the coffee shop. She asked that we take a long walk.

As we walked, Basia said "I want to understand what is going on between you and my best friend. Stefa is very dear to me, and she feels hurt that you rejected her. Do you really love her? Have you ever loved a woman sexually?"

"The answer to your first question is yes. I love Stefa as much as I have ever loved anybody. I admire her; I worship her. The answer to your next question is no, I've never made love to a woman before."

"How old are you now, Meesha?

"I'm twenty-one."

"It's strange. You know, I'm a nurse. I think at your age men are very aggressive sexually and often very promiscuous, too. Are you attracted to men?" She faced me as she asked.

"Absolutely not," I replied. "You may be a nurse, but you're misdiagnosing the problem. We may disagree on something basic. Love means more to me than sex. I mean there is so much beauty, so much exhilaration and joy being in love. I feel as if I'm in another world of peace and abandon when I am with Stefa. I feel so free and easy. I feel as if nothing else matters but to be with her."

"Meesha, you're a romantic. You've read too much Pushkin and Lermontov. Come down to earth. Be realistic. Stefa is a woman in her prime. She needs love and affection, and sexual love as an important part of it. She has known another man, and she knows the joy and ecstasy of love, and you do not. You have a lot to learn. Sexual love can bind and bond you together and transport you to a world of happiness you haven't known and can't imagine."

"Basia, I really appreciate how good you are and how you mean to help me and Stefa. But speaking of coming down to earth, how am I supposed to support a woman or a family? Are we going to rot together in this camp? I'm not even sure whether I would be able to go to Palestine or would go instead with my sister to Uruguay. I'm not sure what Stefa wants to do. I would probably have had sexual relations with another woman much more readily than with Stefa. I love Stefa too much. I don't want to hurt her or me by being impulsive."

"Meesha, you must grow up and start making decisions. T`he sooner the better. You saw the young man at our table last Saturday. He admires Stefa as well and if you insist on purely romantic, platonic love—for whatever reason—you'll lose Stefa. Stefa does love you and respect you, but she wants a mature, real relationship. So the decision is yours."

I embraced Basia, thanked her profusely, and we parted.

A week passed. I kept thinking about Basia's words. I began to regret that I had not been more forthcoming with Stefa, that I had disappointed her. I saw her towards the end of the week, but her warm smile and her wink were gone. I felt that she was lost to me. She was in a hurry to get to work, and we didn't talk much. That evening I had strange feelings. A soft and almost sweet pain grew within me, and rose up, like a snake, choking my throat. It was strange; a feeling of bitter sweetness spread through my whole body, making me weak and dizzy. Then I grew angry with myself. I should have been more understanding. I should never have let her go. Stop playing a romantic saint! Be a man! Be yourself! I chastised myself. Guilt, remorse, and shame grew within me again. I couldn't sleep that night, and in the morning the sweet, choking pain returned to me and tightened my chest.

* * *

Later that morning I saw Luba. She told me that Joseph Gitman had come to Landsberg, and he was anxious to see me. I rushed over to the barracks where he was staying, and we embraced.

"Where were you since I saw you last in Dubno?" I asked.

"Don't ask, Mekhel. It wasn't so easy to get out of that hell."

Joseph told me about his travels through roads infested with Ukrainian guerillas and his arrival in Czechoslavakia in the spring of 1946. He stayed in Prague for a couple of months and then entered the U.S. Occupation Zone.

"So here I am," he said. "And where have you been with Luba?"

I recounted our travels through Krakow, rejoining Moniek's family, and our coming to Landsberg around Christmas. I also told him about my studies at the ORT School and my stay with the *Hashomer Hatzayir,* hoping to go to Palestine. I told Joseph about Luba's marriage and that she was expecting to give birth in September.

We spent the rest of the day together. Joseph told me about his plans to stay in Landsberg and wait for papers from his relatives in New York to immigrate to the U.S. As the day progressed, I told him about my love for Stefa, and my fear of losing her, because of my stupid reluctance.

"You're not so stupid, Mekhel. I can understand your difficulties. I remember how you broke down at our parents' grave. Such trauma leaves a lot of scars. You're probably still in mourning. Give it some time. Don't rush things," he said.

Then I confessed to him how inadequate I had been feeling since I fled the Soviet Army.

"Look, Mekhel, the Soviets had no business taking you into the army in the first place. You know that. And I know of many, formerly from Poland, who had been mistakenly taken into the army, and they did exactly what you did. I can understand your feelings of guilt and embarrassment. And they will probably stay with you for a long time. There is a price to pay for everything, you know, but time is a great healer. Be patient with yourself."

I respected Joseph, but his words were not convincing, at least they did not affect my feelings. I lost Stefa; Luba was so distant. I felt abandoned and alone.

A few days later, on a Sunday, the ORT students went on a *Lag B'Omer* picnic. We rented two small trucks with open seating at the back of the truck, and we took off to a wooded park some ten kilometers away. I was distraught and sad. I continued to feel alone and abandoned. I felt disappointed with myself. I didn't see much hope of ever leaving the camp or pursuing my dreams to become a scientist.

The two trucks were moving in parallel to each other, and we caroused with the people in the other truck. Then an idea came to me. I could stand on my seat and jump over to the other truck. I did get up on my seat, and my friends noticed it. I was almost ready to jump when a few strong hands pulled me down. One of them was Henry Orenstein.

He shouted, "You want to kill yourself?! You stupid ass!"

He held me down. I sat down and stayed down for the rest of the trip. I was a bit angry at Henry. He always was so overbearing, so right. And yet, he was right this time.

At the picnic, Henry Kohn approached me. "Mekhel, why did you do that?"

"I just thought it would be fun." I answered with some embarrassment.

"That is some fun! You could have gotten killed, and you know that," Henry exclaimed with anger."

"So what's the big deal?" I replied.

"What do you mean? Does life mean nothing to you? And if it doesn't, what about your sister?"

"My sister is married, she's expecting, and she has other things to worry about besides me."

"What about Stefa? I thought you loved each other," Henry persisted.

"Stefa found somebody else. She no longer cares about me."

"Ah, I see. Now I understand." Henry looked at me sympathetically. He put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Mekhel, don't take it so seriously. You'll find plenty of women who'll love you."

A few days after the *Lag B'Omer* trip, I visited Luba.

"Mekhel, look at this," she exclaimed with excitement, greeting me as I entered the room. It was an ad in the DP Camp newspaper. "Eeta Doniuk/Rozow is seeking Luba and Mekhel Kesler. Anyone with news of their whereabouts will be generously rewarded."

Eeta was Hershl's younger sister. We were thrilled! We embraced and cried with joy. We immediately sent off a letter to Eeta. A couple of days later, we received a telegram. "Luba, Mekhel, come to see us. Gershon, our two children, and I are in the Fryeburg DP Camp. I am expecting and it is difficult for me to travel. Please come as soon as you can."

A few days later I did take a train to see Eeta, Gershon and their children in Fryeburg. It was an exciting and tearful visit. Eeta told me that Hershl was alive but locked up in a slave labor camp in Siberia. He had been falsely accused of sabotaging an electric generator station in a supply depot that he had worked in after being taken away in Voroshilovograd. His lack of hearing made it impossible for him to deny the charges. He was tortured and forced to admit that he was a foreign agent. However, Eeta hoped

that someday he might be released. I was devastated to hear that. Next morning, I returned to Landsberg.

* * *

In early August the *kibbutz* was preparing to leave for Palestine. We were told to bid farewell to family and friends, so in the evening I went to say goodbye to Luba and Moniek. It was difficult and painful. Would we see each other again? Five years of wandering, of fighting for survival, of joint suffering and worries flooded my mind. My parents' admonition to take care of Luba rang in my ears. Luba was expecting in a month or so. Should I leave them all? Should I go with them to Uruguay? I was torn with doubt and worries.

Luba cried as she embraced me. "I hope we will see each other again," she said when she finally let me go.

Trucks were waiting near the *kibbutz* to take us to Hamburg, where we would board a ship to go to Palestine. We were packed and ready to go. The early morning hours kept ticking away. About 5 a.m., the leader of the *kibbutz* announced that our trip had been cancelled. The British had intercepted the ship that was to take us from Hamburg to Palestine and sequestered it in Cyprus. We were devastated.

Soon life's rhythm resumed. I had a few weeks to complete the radio technician's course, but then what? Would I practice what I learned among the mortal enemies of my people? Unthinkable, unacceptable, I thought. Luba and Moniek were ready to go to Uruguay, but because Luba was expecting in a few weeks, they decided to wait. They urged me to go with them, but I could not feel excited about going to Uruguay. It was a small country with limited opportunities. Besides, I wanted to stand on my own and not

be dependent on Luba or my relatives. It was time to grow up. I wanted to study and become a scientist or an engineer. I began to consider studying engineering in Germany while waiting my turn to go to Palestine. I visited *Munich Technische Hochshule,* took an entrance exam, and registered for the fall semester.

In early September, I went to Munich, signed into one of the dorms, and began my engineering studies, sponsored by JOINT. A few days later I read a notice on the bulletin board*: "B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation* is offering scholarships for qualified DP students. If interested, apply through the UNRRA Office."

The ad intrigued me. Why not take a chance? I sent in copies of my documents and waited. Two weeks later I received a notice from UNRRA, requesting that I take a university entrance exam.

A week before *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, Luba gave birth to a baby boy. I immediately returned to Landsberg. I was excited. I felt as if the child was my own. A few days later, we celebrated the infant's circumcision, a joyous event, shared by all of Moniek's friends and relatives. There was plenty of food, singing, and dancing. The entire community shared in our happiness.

I returned to the university. In early October, I received a letter inviting me to meet with Colonel Jospe, head of the local UNRRA Office. On October 10, I opened the door to Col. Jospe's office, full of anticipation. The Colonel was in his mid-40s with dark hair and Semitic features. I could tell that he was Jewish. He got up. He was not much taller than I.

"Welcome, Michael," he said, as he shook my hand. "Sit down. I have good news for you. You have been admitted to Colby College in Waterville, Maine."

"Col. Jospe, what is a college?" I asked with embarrassment.

He explained it was like a university but did not have all the departments a university had.

"And where is Waterville?"

He opened a map of the United States and laid it out on his desk. He showed me where the state of Maine was and pointed out the town of Waterville.

"You know, I believe that the climate in Maine is probably close to that of Poland, where you come from," he said. Then he described the Hillel Scholarship and emphasized that it would cover all tuition and expenses for four years.

"There is one caveat," he said. American consulates in Germany had stopped accepting any applications for visas. I would have to go to France and stay there for at least six months to establish legal residence. Then, I would be able to leave for the United States.

"Is this alright with you?" Col. Jospe asked.

"Yes, Colonel, very much so," I answered. I'm thrilled with the news, and I thank you, very, very much."

"Please see my secretary, and she'll arrange for your trip from Munich to Paris." He got up, shook my hand, and said softly, "*Mazel Tov*."

I left the Colonel's office as if drunk with joy and excitement. Maybe this is the beginning, a new beginning of a new life, I thought. And yet, I felt some disappointment that I would not go to Palestine, after all. I grew up, as a child and teenager, with the dream of redeeming the land of ancient Israel. The sarcastic taunting of my Polish classmates before the war "Jew, go to Palestine," reinforced those dreams. Zionist

literature, teachers in the Hebrew school, lectures, the press and all sorts of after-school activities strengthened my dreams and beliefs that Palestine belonged to the Jews and that we belonged there. The Holocaust confirmed to me that living as a minority in foreign countries subjected the Jews to whims of dictators and killers. Palestine, I was convinced, and only Palestine, would provide a safe haven for us, the remnants of the horrific crimes committed against us throughout Europe and through the ages.

I felt comfortable in the *kibbutz,* my adopted home. The spirit of *Hashomer Hatzayir,* as well as the daily and weekend routines made me feel as if I were in Palestine, helping to build a Jewish national home. I was prepared and eager to go to Palestine, but the world conspired against us, again. Meanwhile, I had this miraculous opportunity to go to the U.S. and study. Maybe this is right. Let me first learn a profession, then I will go and will be a productive citizen of the new Jewish nation, I reflected.

The next morning, I went to the Registrar's office and announced I was leaving for the States and showed him the admission to Colby College. He said the University would send me a statement listing the courses I had taken and the grades I received, and then congratulated me and wished me well. I packed my few belongings and took the train to Landsberg.

Luba was surprised to see me, and ecstatic about my scholarship award and imminent travel to Paris. She looked happy, but told me that a month earlier she had had to go to the hospital to remove a cyst on her breast.

"Nothing to worry about, Mekhel," she said. "It was a just a little cyst and it was not cancerous. I am 100 percent all right; don't worry."

I did worry though, and felt guilty that I wasn't there at the time of her need. Had she fallen ill because of worry about us parting? I reflected.

Luba showed me the baby asleep in the corner. The boy was now three months old and I thought he was the most beautiful child on earth.

"Where's Moniek?" I asked.

"He's trying to patent his new design of an electric shaver," Luba answered. "You know a lot of Orthodox people would not grow beards nor use ordinary blades, but they think, apparently, it was all right to use electric shavers. So Moniek is trying to come up with a patented good design and start making some money. We shall see."

"And what about Uruguay? When do you think you'll be able to go?" I asked.

"We decided to postpone it until the spring, until Nathan grows a bit older and easier to manage," Luba answered. "Sit down, Mekhel. I'll prepare some food. Moniek should be home soon too."

"While you do that Luba, let me run over to the ORT office and find out what happened to my classmates," I said. "I should be back in an hour or two."

A few minutes later, I arrived at the ORT office and found out that most of my classmates were gainfully employed, mostly in Munich; Henry Kohn and a couple of other students were working in Landsberg. I stopped at the *kibbutz* and discovered that most of its members were still there, waiting impatiently to go to Palestine.

Then I went to Stefa's apartment. She was caught by surprise and greeted me cheerfully. We embraced, but I felt she was cautious with me. We sat down and I told her about my good fortune.

"What about yourself, Stefa?" I asked.

"I don't know Meesha. I'm still waiting for papers from my relatives in America," she answered.

"And meanwhile?" I asked.

"That is a leading question, I suppose," Stefa said. "You remember the man you met in the cafeteria several months ago? I've been going out with him. He wants to go to Palestine, and I may go with him."

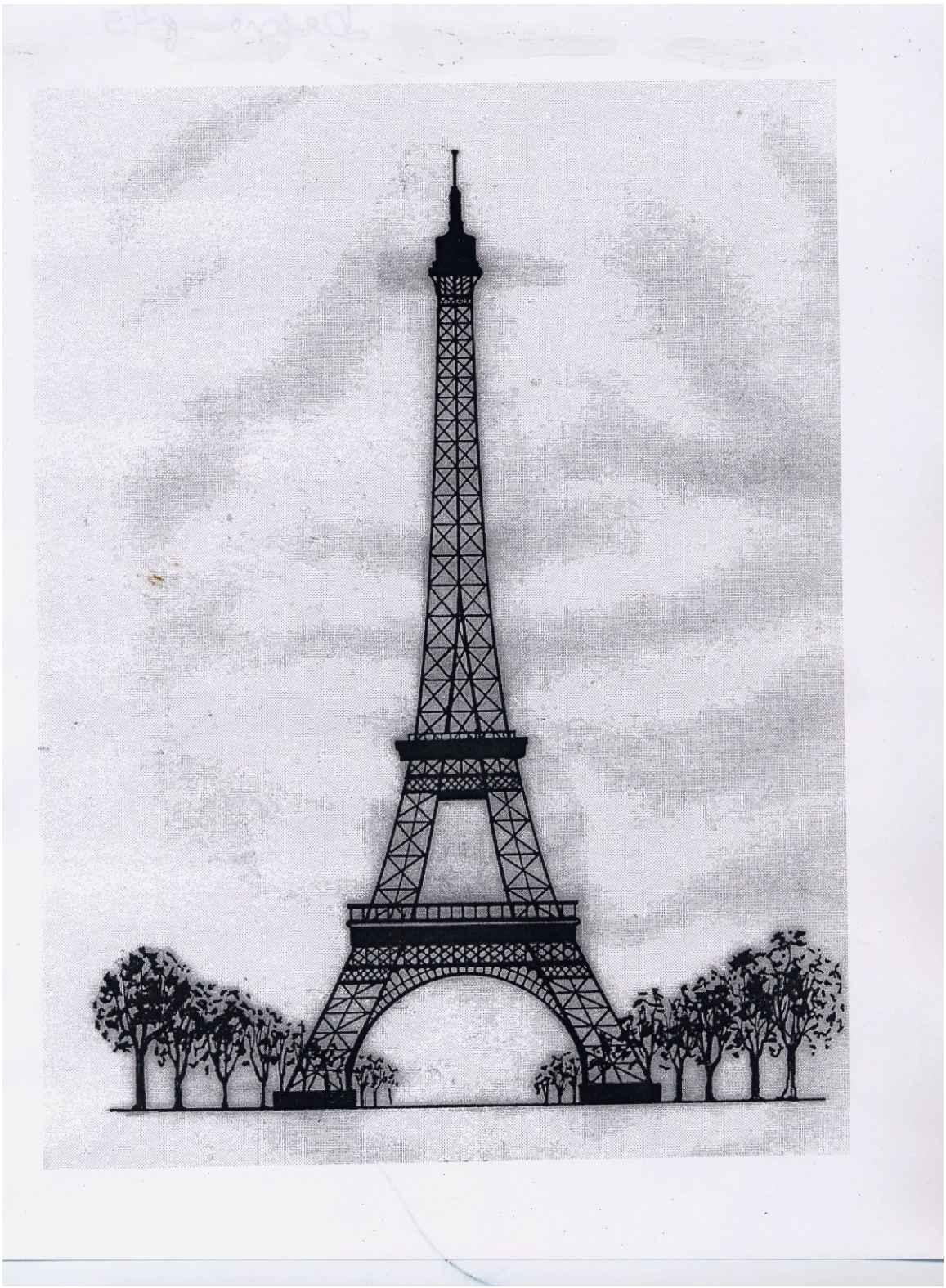
I felt sad. True, it was I who had pushed Stefa away, but that was a few months earlier. Now I had hopes for a new life in America and I had dreamt Stefa might want to join me. I was jealous; I was disappointed. Stefa prepared tea and refreshments. We sat and talked for awhile, and then I bid her goodbye. Stefa held me in her arms, and said softly "I'm sorry, Meesha."

The evening meal with Luba and Moniek was filled with banter. I shared my dreams of studying to be an engineer; Moniek told me with enthusiasm about his plans to market the electric shaver and to develop other ideas he had in mind. In the morning, I bid Luba and Moniek goodbye. I tried to be happy, but I was sad. It was difficult to part. Would I see Luba, Moniek and my little nephew ever again?

"Luba, I want to ask you a favor," I said. "I didn't have a chance to say goodbye to Joseph Gitman. Would you please tell him that I was sorry and that I hoped we would see each other in Paris? Last I heard, he was going to go to the States and would probably need to go through Paris."

I embraced Luba, shook hands with Moniek, kissed Nathan and left.

Shortly, I was off to Munich. Later in the afternoon, I took the train to Paris.



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Mark Sherman, Delmar, C.A.

Chapter 11: Heading for the States – Renaissance in Paris

Healing

I fell in love, as if in a trance,
with the city of wonder, the city of lights,
Paris, the beauty, the jewel of France,
and its audacious embrace of time and space.

My soul sprung to life as if released from a sling,
and explored with delight its gardens and parks,
the Notre Dame, the Sacre Coeur and the heights of Montmartre,
and the Louvre exploding with a kaleidoscope of art.

My soul found healing in the concert halls,
in tune with Eroica and Elixir of Love,
in resonance with lovers' embrace,
amidst gentle cooing of doves.

My soul found peace with a prayer shawl,
a choir chant that I sang as a child,
remembering the past with a dear friend,
challenging God and the premise of Faith.

These events and more mended my soul
and I began to feel whole.

I arrived in Paris on the morning of November 30, 1946, under the sponsorship of the Joint Distribution Committee (JOINT). A JOINT staff member met me at the Orly train station. He introduced himself in French.

Jacques Kaufman told me he would help me get settled in Paris. He was in his 20s, a bit taller than I, jovial and smiling. I asked him to speak slowly since my French was limited. He apologized as he led me to the Metro Station. We boarded the train and went to the Bellevue Station. We went out and walked a short distance to *Passage de La Croix,* a small narrow alley in the twentieth *Arondissment.*

Jacques registered me with the concierge and the three of us went up to the second floor. We walked down a long, dark, narrow hall, and the concierge opened the door to a small room. She gave me the keys to the room, showed me how to use the little gas stove in the corner, and left. The room was about five feet wide and eight feet long with a small, dirty window at the end; the walls were cracked, and the paint was peeling off, exposing large patches of sheetrock. A narrow bed at the right of the entrance, a small round table near the window with two chairs, opposite the sink and the little stove, filled the room. I put my satchel on the bed, and Jacques and I sat down at the table.

Jacques apologized in a mixture of Yiddish and French for the poor accommodations. He explained that the twentieth *Arondissment* was the poorest in Paris.

"The city was built like a spiral," he explained to me, "with the first *Arondissment* being the richest at the center, followed by less well-to-do areas, and ending with this, where mostly blue-collar people live."

He gave me the address of a radio repair shop where JDC had found a job for me, and the address of a cafeteria where I would be having my evening meals. He also gave me a week's supply of meal tickets and some pocket money for daily expenses. He shook my hand enthusiastically and bid me good luck. Thus I was initiated as a Parisian.

Later in the day, I traveled to a radio shop owned by a French Jew, Francois Gilbert, who fortunately spoke a bit of Yiddish. Francois was cordial, but business-like.

"I'm sure you know the trade well; the Germans are good, precise teachers," he told me, after I showed him my papers from the ORT School in Landsberg. "However, you need to be able to communicate with the customers, before I can use you," he said.

He told me there was a good school nearby, called *Alliance Francaise* that teaches French. He wanted me to enroll in the school, and offered to pay the tuition, as well as my regular salary. "Do you agree?" he asked. I thanked him profusely. He went into his office and shortly came out, "You're lucky. There's a course scheduled to begin tomorrow. Go and register in that course. And, come back as soon as you feel you're ready to face customers. Shall I see you in four or six weeks?" I shook his hand and left.

I took the train back to Bellevue and stepped out on the street. I found a small grocery store, bought some food and other necessities and went upstairs to my little room. The next morning, I came to the *Alliance Francaise,* and for the next six weeks I immersed myself in the study of French. My studies began in early morning and lasted all day. Evenings I had dinner in the cafeteria that served mostly refugees, like me. I took a liking to French; it was soft, sonorous and beautiful to enunciate. I loved the literature I was getting exposed to. The passion for social justice and equality and enlightenment in the writings of Hugo, Zola, Balzac and others stirred me with hope. Maybe there is a future, a just peaceful future for man, after all, I thought.

In mid-January, I came back to the radio shop. Francois greeted me and engaged me in conversation. "Hey! You're a fast learner," he said, after testing my conversational skills. "I think you're ready to start serious work," he said. Indeed, I felt fit and ready with my language skills, as well as with repair and some sales work Francois asked me to do. The working hours were much shorter than the ones I forced upon myself while studying French. After 5 p.m., I had a couple of hours before dinner in the cafeteria. I began to explore the streets of Paris. This was the most beautiful city I had ever seen. The vastness of *Champs Elysee,* the beauty of the *Arch de Triumph,* the

expanse of *Place de la Concorde,* the uplifting view of the *Eiffel Tower,* and the endless parks in the middle of the city – they all filled me with excitement and admiration. Where does so much genius for architecture, city planning, construction and esthetics come from, I wondered. How did it all come together here in Paris? I learned that most of the Paris I saw was of relatively recent origin, beginning with the middle of the 18th century, but mostly due to Napoleon. How did Napoleon manage to conduct all the wars and still devote so much time and energy to rebuilding the city? I was awed.

Soon I learned about the various concert halls and musical events in the city. Standing room tickets were cheap and I took full advantage of them, particularly on weekends. Paris had become, after the war, the Mecca of the artistic world. I had gotten exposed to the classics in Germany on radio. This was the first time I heard famous conductors, composers and soloists in person. This was the first time I really listened carefully to and heard the awesomeness of the *Eroica*, the urgency of the *Fifth* and the cosmic reaches of the *Ninth* – the most exalting music ever composed by man, I thought. Beethoven spoke to me so personally, so intimately; I felt as if he had written the music just for me. And his music was so complex, yet so direct and so simple; so powerful, yet so beautiful. I was excited also by the visits of Yehuda Menuhin, Bela Bartok, Isaac Stern and Igor Pyatigorsky. Enesco came to conduct his Romanian Rhapsody at the Trocadero, and I was there too. Music filled me with delight and excitement. I would often go to sleep humming excerpts of the music I heard earlier in the evening. I felt as if a nectar of sweetness permeated my body. It made me feel wholesome and strong.

I had a vision of Stefa being near me. She was so beautiful and she was blinking her eyes at me, again, full of smiles and softness. I felt a sweetness mixed with pain

choking me. I was so foolish, so stupid to leave her. I got up in the middle of the night and wrote a long letter. I described my new life in Paris, my musical adventures, my love of the city. I told her how much I missed her and expressed my love for her. I asked whether she might join me in Paris, and suggested the two of us might go to the States. Writing the letter and the thought of having Stefa with me filled me with a joy and excitement I hadn't had since seeing her last in the camp. Maybe she will come, maybe she will come, I kept repeating almost audibly to others at the radio shop, next morning.

In late March, I met Joseph Gitman in the cafeteria, the gathering place of Jewish refugees and transients. I was delighted and excited to see him and he seemed to be delighted as well. Joseph was on his way to the States and he would have to stay here six months to establish residence before being able to leave for the States, just as I had to do. He had arrived here a few days earlier and found a room in another dilapidated hotel not far from my place. We sat down to eat and I couldn't stop talking about my Hillel scholarship and my adventures in Paris. I felt as if we had shifted roles: I knew so much more French and about Paris than Joseph; I felt at home, while he acted as a stranger, bewildered by the awesome city. I began to act as if I were his older brother. For the next month or so, I saw little of Joseph; he too had enrolled to take a course in the *Alliance Francaise* and had little spare time.

Passover came in mid-April. The Seder was conducted in the cafeteria by a young rabbi who spoke French which sounded strange to me, although I had become quite facile with the language. I knew most of the melodies and I sang them with gusto. JOINT provided the kosher meal.

The next morning, Joseph and I visited the famed *Rothschild Synagogue* near the *Place de la Condorde*. As we entered, we fetched prayer shawls and prayer books and joined in prayer. Surprisingly, the prayers were essentially the same as those in the prayer books of Dubno, so were the melodies of the important prayers. The cantor, a well-trained tenor, and the male choir sang the prayer for *Dew,* composed by Yosele Rosenblatt, which I had known well. The prayer was so beautiful, I felt as if I were transported to the great synagogue of Dubno. I had not been to a synagogue, with a cantor and choir, since leaving home nearly six years before. I felt at home, returning after a long absence.

Joseph and I left the synagogue and took a long walk on *Champs Elysee.*

"Joseph," I said, "I loved the music in the synagogue. I felt as if I was singing with the choir as I had sung in the choir of Cantor Sherman in Dubno. The service was so beautiful! But, you know, I feel as if it was all a farce. How can you pray to an Almighty God, the King of the Universe, who was blind to the Holocaust, who let his people down."

"Mekhel, Mekhel," Joseph said. "You certainly said a mouthful, but it is not quite correct. You see, you're taking the words of the prayers too literally. God is certainly not a king, not a general. He doesn't have any mechanized armies to fight evil men like Hitler. God is an idea, a concept, not a corporal being. And the prayers, Jewish or Christian, are texts, written by talented poets and dreamers, to represent the idea of God as they understood it and in a way that it will relate to people's conception of God."

I was startled. "What do you mean by an idea, a concept," I said, almost shouting.

"God as an idea is the embodiment of perfection: perfection of justice, fairness, compassion, goodness and peace. It's the ultimate standard of human behavior, in resonance with the harmony in the universe," Joseph answered.

"And what do you do with this idea?" I asked.

"You try to strive for it. You try to make others strive for it. You make people – all people – agree to achieve those ultimate standards and then, only then, will you be able to avoid the likes of Hitler," Joseph said.

"But we have had religious establishments for several millennia. Have they stopped violence? Have they helped people live in peace? How is God as an idea you're suggesting going to be different?" I persisted.

"Yes, we have had religious institutions that have, in fact, caused violence as well, as in the case of the crusades. We have also had fascism as a religion. We have had a *Tower of Babel* as far as communications and understandings between religions go. Indeed, most religions have tried to force themselves on others by arms and killings. God as an Idea. I am talking about is to evolve and be accepted by people everywhere through peaceful understanding and respect of each other," Joseph answered.

"And meanwhile, how would you prevent violence and crimes?" I asked.

"We Jews talk about the Messianic era. We have no date for it, and the belief that the Messiah will arrive on a white horse one day is also a legend. And I wouldn't get hung up on those issues. I rather think that each day that we do some good, each day that we live in peace, we advance the coming of the Messiah, we advance the concept of God as an idea. I believe that the coming of the Messiah is a process, an endless process, that depends on us, you and me, doing good."

"And what about God being the creator of the universe?" I asked.

"That is a cosmic question," Joseph answered with a smile, "that we have not tackled in our *Tachkemoni* deliberations. I don't know the first thing about it.

We stopped at the cafeteria for lunch. Then, we resumed our discussions of God, the unique relationship between the Jews and God, the relationship between a person and God, and the meaning of life. The long afternoon profoundly changed my view of myself and of the world around me. I gained enormous respect for Joseph.

It was the first time in my life that I began to see my Jewish religion, sketched out by Joseph, as a meaningful, profound way of understanding the world around me and my relationship to that world – without clutter, without torturous interpretations and imagery. I was also beginning to reconcile the concepts Joseph was talking about with my own basic knowledge of science. I felt comfortable with these ideas and I began to feel proud of being a Jew.

Next Saturday, Joseph and I revisited the Rothschild Synagogue. And we continued our discussions about God and the Jews. When I came back to my little abode, the concierge handed me a letter. It was from Stefa. My heart stopped beating. I opened the letter and found a beautiful picture of Stefa in her nurse's outfit, smiling, beaming with happiness, and there were a few warm greetings on the back of the photograph. The letter was full of detail about her daily routine and life in the camp. Yes, she was still waiting for a visa to the U.S. But she'd probably go to Palestine with her friend. She thanked me for writing to her and remembering her. She was still very fond of me and wished me good luck in the States. I was hurt and disappointed. But I had no one to blame but myself…

In May 1947, Luba, Moniek, and their infant son, Nathan, came to Paris. They were finally able to obtain their visas to Uruguay. They arranged, with the help of JOINT, to stop for a week in Paris to visit me. JOINT found a hotel room for them.

Six months had passed since I had seen them last. My sister, brother-in-law, and baby had changed so much! Luba had more wrinkles on her face and quite a bit of gray hair. Moniek also looked as if he had aged during this short period. They were both sad and had a severe look about them. They must have gone through hell waiting for the visa to come through, I thought.

Luba now had her head covered with a kerchief and she wore a long dress with long sleeves, the way the ultra-Orthodox women in the Displaced Persons' Camp of Lundsberg did. Her sentences were filled with "God willing" and "God will help". I felt uneasy about it.

Our home in Dubno was traditional, but far removed from being ultra-Orthodox. Mom held liberal views of religion and Judaism. I remembered Luba being the "rebel" in the family, professing disbelief in a personal God, to the chagrin of my parents. During our travels and sojourn in the Soviet Union, Luba and I practiced little of the Jewish religion.

The year and a half of marriage seemed to have transformed Luba into a person I hardly recognized as my sister. Moniek had become stricter in his observance of Jewish laws and mores and occasionally taunted me on becoming a non-believer. Suddenly, I became uncomfortable with my sister and my closest and only friends. I became angry that religion began to pry us apart.

I saw Luba privately and told her I was concerned about the growing gulf between us. Luba reproached me. "One day you'll get married and you'll see what it takes to share a life with somebody. Moniek is a good man, and he needs religion, his way of practicing religion, to feel wholesome, to feel happy. Am I to deny him this happiness? I'll be all right, don't worry."

Maybe she made sense, I thought. But I observed that Moniek became autocratic in other ways as well. He had an urge to control and direct daily tasks and often lost his temper if Luba or I contradicted him in any way. He knew a lot about Orthodox tradition and Luba knew little. Was religion a natural excuse for him to be overbearing? I wondered.

I saw Luba and Moniek daily, after work, but I began to be more guarded expressing my thoughts and feelings. A strange tension crept into our relationship. Nonetheless, I shared in Luba and Moniek's happiness together and their hopes for the future.

Our aunt and uncle in Uruguay had written to Luba and Moniek that they would be living in their own apartment, that Luba would be able to get work as a teacher in the Hebrew School, and Moniek would have no difficulty finding work. Moniek by now had developed an electric shaver which he hoped to perfect and market in Uruguay. He shared with me other ingenuous ideas with the excitement of the time when I had first met him. They were both determined to do well and I knew they had the talent and tenacity to do so.

I took Luba, Moniek, and little Nathan for long walks through the streets and monuments of Paris. One late afternoon, we went up the *Eiffel Tower.* We admired the

city below, stretched before us as a huge panorama of parks and beautiful, wide streets. I was elated with the view and my beloved visitors. I was proud of being the host and acted as if I was a native Parisian.

Two days later, I accompanied Luba and Moniek to Gare St. Lazarre where they would take the train to Spain, and then board a ship to Uruguay. I held little Nathan on my shoulders while Luba and Moniek carried their belongings. The thought of separation invaded my mind; I was distraught, but I cheered Luba and Moniek on. "Remember, in a few years, I will be a citizen of the U.S. and I will be able to bring you to America if things don't work out in Uruguay," I said.

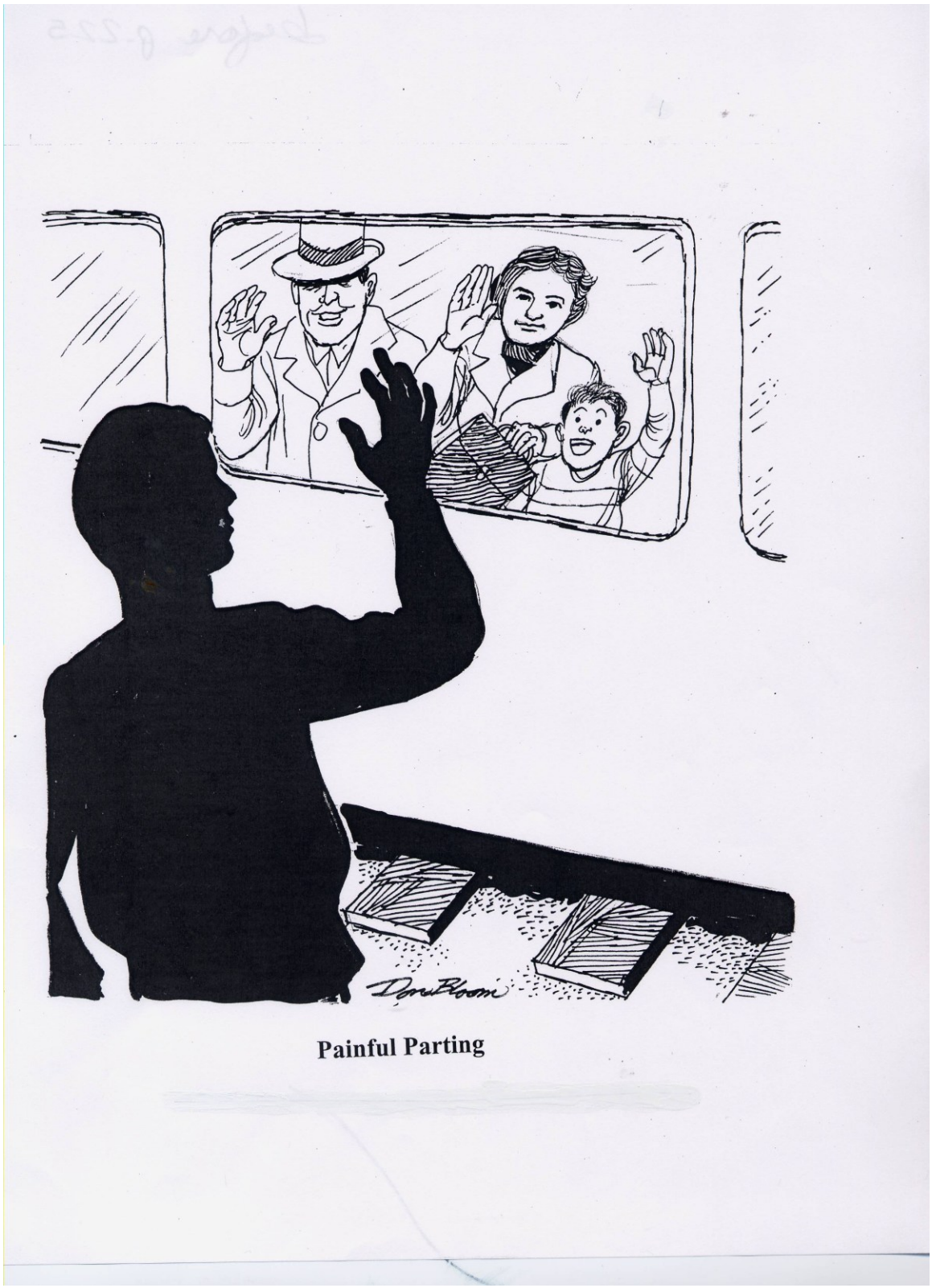
I boarded the train, helped them to get settled, and bid them goodbye. I turned to leave the car and Luba ran after me, pulled me towards her and held me for a long time. I felt her cheeks were moist.

"Take good care of yourself, my brother," she said, her eyes filled with tears.

"Please write to me, Lubushka Golubushka," I said. "You are the only one I have left in the world."

I ran out to the platform. I remembered six years earlier in Shepetovka, when Hershl and his friends, Luba and I, learned how to jump onto a moving train. "You wait for the locomotive whistle and then you run and jump," Hershl taught us. We have come a long way, I thought. The war was gone; we were safe. Luba and Moniek seemed secure and before long I'd be in the States pursuing my dreams. Not bad.

I did hear the locomotive siren and the train pulled away. I waved goodbye to Moniek and Luba who were glued to the window of the car. I waited until I lost sight of the train. Suddenly, I felt so alone.



Painful Parting

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Don Bloom, E. Brunswick, N.J.

I left the train station and walked towards the River Seine. It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon. The sun reflected in the river in a myriad of little mirrors dancing with the waves. The promenade was filled with people strolling along, vendors and jesters. Doves were cooing in a little enclave and two lovers were sitting on a bench, passionately embracing and kissing each other. I was transported to the Sunday a year earlier lying near Stefa. She was the one who took the initiative and wanted to be with me, I remembered. So, she did love me. "Live a little," Stefa had admonished me. I felt a sweet nectar rise in my throat and pulsating blood filling my veins. Yes, it was time to start a new life, I decided, as I quickened my step.

Bastille Day, July 14, overwhelmed me with excitement and camaraderie. The streets were filled with colorful crowds, military parades, jesters, and vendors. People were dancing, embracing one another, and singing harmoniously in unison, as if led by a magic conductor. The *Marceillaise* blared from every loudspeaker. The motto of the French Revolution - "*Liberte, Fraternite, Egalite*"- was alive and well. In the evening, I shared my excitement with Joseph and how impressed I was with the motto.

"They don't tell much of the bloodshed damage of the French Revolution," he said. "They don't tell of the thousands of innocent people butchered by the guillotine; the hatred it generated between kin and friends; the cauldron of violence it ignited, the rise of Napoleon, and the resulting deaths of hundreds of thousands, during the Napoleonic Wars that followed it all."

I was surprised to hear that. My teachers had glorified the French Revolution, claiming it had brought freedom and an age of enlightenment. But Joseph had a point: the French Revolution brought respectability to violence, random violence. Just as the

Russian Revolution had done, I thought, giving rise to slave-labor camps and the wanton killings of innocents.

* * *

In early August I obtained my papers to travel to the U.S. I felt as if I were walking on air. The next day I came to the radio shop and I bid goodbye to Francois. I saw Joseph and he told me that he expected to leave for America in a month or so, as well and he hoped that we would soon see each other. I fetched my few belongings and boarded the train for LeHavre, where I took a ferry to Southampton. There I boarded a ship, the Marine Fletcher, to cross the Atlantic. The ship was small, used to transport military personnel. We were greeted the first evening with a reception that overwhelmed me. I had never seen the variety and quantity of food, which I consumed with wild enthusiasm. Alas, this was my first and last big meal on my voyage. I became violently ill and the doctor cut my food intake to a bare minimum. I was relieved and happy to disembark at one of the Hudson piers in New York City on August 17, 1947.

A young lady from the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS) met me after I cleared customs and immigration procedures. The lady hailed a taxi, and we went to the HIAS offices. A staff member sat down with me, opened a thick file, and described my itinerary and living arrangements.

For the next two weeks, I was to stay in Astoria, Queens, with a family who had come from my hometown in the 1930s. After that I would proceed to Waterville, Maine to enroll at Colby College. Meanwhile, HIAS had arranged for me to go to the B'nai B'rith Headquarters in Washington, D.C., to meet with Hillel staff. I traveled to

Washington the next day and met Dr. Abraham Sahar, Hillel Director, in his spacious office.

Dr. Sahar was a handsome man, in his 50s. He had a warm smile and a twinkle in his eyes. I asked him politely to speak slowly since I didn't know much English.

"I'm very happy to see you here," Dr. Sahar said. "You are one of fifty displaced-person students we have been able to sponsor to study in this country. It wasn't easy, but it was a labor of love for me personally."

He described the difficulties he and his colleagues faced trying to place students with questionable documents and whom the universities and colleges had not seen.

"Well, it's all done," he said. "I am confident that you and the other students are well-deserving and will do well in whatever field you choose. I've looked through your file; I was saddened to read of the loss of your family and friends. We hope this country will help heal your wounds."

Dr. Sahar inquired about my life in the Soviet Union and my education in Samarkand and in Munich. As the conversation continued, he told me about Hillel and how important the organization was to Jewish students on many campuses in the U.S. Then he told me about his own commitments to Hillel and of his part in the rescue of Jewish academics in Europe. In the late 1930s, he had organized a program--with the help of Albert Einstein, among others--to bring hundreds of Jewish professors and other prominent professionals to the U.S. Most of these chosen immigrants would have probably perished if they had stayed in Europe.

"So, you see, bringing you and the other 49 students now is, for me, a continuation of a very important mission. I only wish we could have brought more students here," he concluded.

Two weeks after my arrival in the States, I was on my way to Waterville, Maine. I was met at the station by a short, blonde lady and her young teenage son.

"My name is Frieda Lubell," she greeted me. "I am the chairperson of the B'nai B'rith Ladies Auxiliary and this is my son, David. We have come to welcome you here," she said in Yiddish. She took me by the hand, David picked up my small valise and we went to her car. Soon we arrived at their home.

"For the next two weeks you will have to suffer being with us," Mrs. Lubell said. "The college is moving to a new location on Mayflower Hill, but the construction is not yet completed. So you'll stay with us, all right?"

I was delighted. Mrs. Lubell introduced me to her daughter, Elizabeth, age 10. In the evening, I met Dr. Moe Lubell, a short man nearly balding with a round, almost child-like face, large brown eyes, and heavy-rimmed eyeglasses. Dr. Lubell was a radiologist in local hospitals. For the next fortnight, I became part of the Lubell family. I also immersed myself in studying English. I was sorry I hadn't taken time to study English in Paris, having been too absorbed with the other rich experiences the city had offered.

Soon I entered the new dorms of Colby College. The fresh paint teased my nostrils and my mind. I felt alive and elated, as if airborne. The nightmare of the last six years receded from my memory; the lawless jungle of violence and cruelty-prone chance was gone. No more running; no need to hide; no need to fear! A magic curtain lifted a

heavy veil of worry and despair and opened before me a kaleidoscope of possibilities, full of hope and promise. Ah! If only Mother and Father were here….

Reflections

Writing this book challenged me emotionally. Chills traversed my body as I recalled the times we could have died or could have been killed, but for a capricious turn of fate. If Mother hadn't changed her mind to let us leave, we would have stayed home, as had almost all other Jews of Dubno. If Father hadn't given me his watch when parting, and I hadn't chased after the boy who stole that watch, thereby losing my place in the queue, Luba and I would have boarded a boat that hit a mine and sank in the Volga River. Sentries might have shot Luba, our cousin Hershl, his companions or me as we jumped onto moving trains to flee the approaching German army. I might have been sent to Siberia for stealing a stump of wood in the bitter cold near Stalingrad if the anti-Semitic judge – rather than his young assistant – had presided over my trial. Luba might have taken a turn for worse as she lay critically ill with typhoid in an Uzbek village, and neither I nor Luba would have survived the harsh conditions of war without the good will and unexpected help from people – Russian or Jewish – in the Ukraine and Stalingrad, as well as Muslim Uzbeks in the villages of Uzbekistan. I would have been sent to the front to help clear mines, if Luba hadn't miraculously found me just a week before leaving the training camp.

I have felt outraged at the enormity and bestiality of the crimes that the Germans and my own countrymen, Ukrainians and Poles, committed against the Jews, and the methodical ways they employed: crowding of Jewish inhabitants into small ghettos, while robbing them of their homes and possessions; starving the people of the ghetto and depriving them of all will to resist; isolating sections of the ghetto at midnight and hauling the residents, by foot or on trucks, to the outskirts; forcing the captives to dig

their own graves; machine-gunning them, and pushing the wounded – dead or alive – with bulldozers into the mass graves.

I have mourned the loss of my parents, relatives, friends and nearly all of the 8,000 Jewish inhabitants of my hometown. Had they lived, they could have done so much good. My friends Sophie and Henry, as well as other Jewish classmates, had shared with me dreams of becoming scientists, engineers, writers, actors and teachers, but their lives were ended before they even had a chance to grow up. Their loss has surely left Poland and the Ukraine economically, culturally and spiritually poorer and weaker, and worse places to live.

I have felt pain that the cancer of anti-Semitism, fanned by maniacal demagogues, had choked off all feelings of decency and guilt, turning populations into unconscionable bystanders and millions into robbers and killers.

The catastrophic events of World War II have aroused my concerns about the increasing global violence and the genocides and mass murders of the past 60 years: in India, following its partition into Pakistani and Hindu states; in China, during the "Agrarian Revolution" and the "Cultural Revolution"; in Cambodia, during the Pol Pot reign of terror; in Rwanda, the Congo, Nigeria, and Darfur. These continuous conflicts appear to diminish the sensitivity to bloodshed and human misery, among people everywhere, including us.

I have become concerned with new dangers to Jews, reminiscent of the 1930s. Virulent anti-Semitism is, again, filling the airwaves, the press, and the internet. Tens of millions of Muslim children learn hatred and violence daily at school. Academicians and heads of state deny the Holocaust. Dictators hurl nuclear threats and annihilation against

the survivors of the Holocaust. These and other existential dangers to Jewish continuity alarm and disturb me. Have we learned anything from the past?

I have become more aware, while writing this book, of the damages my experiences during that horrible period had done to my own psyche and soul. The loss of my home and of my parents' love has made me harsher and often angrier than I have wanted to be; it has made me less secure socially and professionally. It has limited my reach and vision, has increased my anxiety and fear of the unknown. Thus, I feel shy and awkward with high-level executives of industry. My inner insecurity, sometimes bordering on paranoia, had led me to leave prestigious positions with Exxon and, later, with Mobil. The company I founded could have grown larger had I been bolder, less inhibited and more comfortable with myself and other people. I often bemoan the sadness within me, which has diminished, to an extent, the happiness of my children and my conjugal life.

On the other side of the ledger, I credit my war difficulties with helping me to mature to become resourceful and industrious, and to help me achieve a level of professionalism and well-being neither I, nor my parents, had ever dreamed of. Arriving in this country with $50 in my pocket and no relatives to rely on, I was able to do well in the most outstanding engineering school in the world, MIT. I pursued my evening studies for a Ph.D., even while working to support a family (as well as being the Cantor of a major synagogue). I reached high positions with Exxon and Mobil, while tending to a wife stricken with cancer and, subsequently, raising four teenage children as a single parent.

My fight for survival during the war years gave me the strength to start my own consulting firm and do well even while going progressively blind, due to glaucoma. Indeed, I have come to appreciate how precious life is and how beautiful it can be, and I have tried to live fully each day. I am proud that my present wife and I have raised a beautiful family of six children, who are all doing well, and I am thrilled with our eleven grandchildren. I have been able to contribute in a meaningful way to social and charitable causes, as my own suffering during the war has made me more sensitive to human needs everywhere.

I am deeply thankful that my sister and I did survive and are, with large families, well-established in the U.S. I have come to admire this country, my country and that of my children: its freedoms, its respect for individuals and minorities; its system of checks and balances in its government and the separation between state and church; the diversity and fairness of its citizenry, and its concern for human rights. I believe these unique characteristics will ensure that this country will continue to be the bulwark in the war against hatred and bigotry that threaten the well-being and peace for people everywhere.

This venture into my past has been a catharsis, an opportunity to relive the difficult period of my life. I wanted to share my experiences, as well as my feelings and thoughts, of that period to benefit my children, grandchildren, friends and all who would care to read these pages. It is my hope that this book will cast more light – albeit diffused by time – on the darkest period of civilized humankind.

Epilogue

My Life in the United States

My first few months of freshman studies were difficult at Colby College, since I did not know much English. However, during the second semester, I found a need for more challenging studies. My physics professor, an M.I.T graduate, suggested I apply to that institution, which I did. At the end of the year, I received news of my admission to M.I.T. as a second-year student.

In September of 1948, I came to M.I.T. At the end of the year I had to declare my specialty. I chose chemical engineering. The department faculty consisted of the "fathers" of chemical engineering, among them the famed Dr. Warren K. Lewis (Doc). It also included somewhat younger "giants" of the field. They were excellent pedagogues as well ("Don't tell me what the textbook says," Doc Lewis would turn to a student, "I want to know what you think!").

In the summer of 1949, I attended an international student fair at Harvard. A vivacious, attractive, bright-looking woman caught my attention. She was petite, but she had a commanding presence, confident as a woman and a person. She had red hair with a few freckles on her face, wide brown eyes and full, smiling lips. I introduced myself.

"My name is Regina Chanowicz," she said.

I was instantly attracted to her. We began to talk. She had been born in Suwalki, Poland, and had been forcibly evacuated with her family to the Soviet Union in the fall of 1940. They had spent a year and a half in a slave labor camp, and then were released—with other Polish internees—and were sent to Kyrgyzstan. A year later Regina entered Moscow University Medical School, which had been evacuated to Frunze, Kyrgyzstan,

where she lived with her family. At the end of the war in 1945, the family went back to Poland and soon emigrated to Sweden. In 1947, Regina came to the U.S. as a student, sponsored by her uncles in Norfolk, Virginia. Currently, she was studying at Simmons College.

I was pleasantly surprised; as was Regina: we had so much in common! We had common dreams, too—to study, to fulfill our thirst for knowledge, for contributing to society, for avenging the loss of so many of our people with personal achievements and good deeds. And, a thought crossed my mind: we also had an obligation to bring forth a new generation.

I saw Regina a lot in the waning weeks of summer. We became friends and lovers. A year later she graduated Simmons and began work as a laboratory technician for Professor Farber of Harvard University. He thought she should finish her medical studies and recommended her admission to Harvard Medical School. Regina was admitted to the third year, Harvard recognized her studies at Moscow Medical School. Thus she became one of the first five women students at Harvard Medical School.

In 1952 I married Regina, who had just graduated from Harvard Medical School. After a few years of transition, we settled in Paramus, New Jersey, where Regina practiced pediatrics while I worked as an engineer. During that period I was also the cantor of the Jewish Community Center of Paramus, and later, I pursued evening studies towards my Ph.D. at NYU, which I obtained in 1968.

Regina and I became parents to four children. Mark is an executive with IBM — he and his wife, Peggy, a teacher, and son Aaron, live near Boston. May is a physical therapist—she and her husband, Leonard, a psychologist, and daughter, Regina, live near

Washington, D.C. David is an architect—he and his wife Cori, a graphic artist, and son Joe, and daughter Maya, live in Berkeley, California; and Ted is an educator on the faculty of Queens College—he and his wife, Judy, also an educator, and daughter Korina, and son Daniel, live in White Plains, N.Y.

In 1969, Regina became ill with cancer; she died in 1973. A year later, I moved with the children to East Brunswick, N.J.

In 1984, I met an attractive, dynamic, and brilliant brunette, Barbara Reed. Barbara had come to the area a year earlier and worked as a professor of journalism and mass communications at Rutgers University. We became close and were married in 1985. Barbara had two children from a previous marriage, Michael and Ester. Michael is an engineer—he and his wife, Patty, a PR person, and daughters Megan and Hannah live in Mountainview, California; Ester is a Hillel director at Rutgers University—she and her husband, Mordechai, a rabbi, and three boys--Isaac, Sammy and Jonah--live in Highland Park, N.J.

My professional work started with M.W. Kellogg, a premier engineering and construction firm serving the petroleum and petrochemical industries. In 1956, I co-developed a major commercial application of computers to process design of refinery unit operations. This pioneering work propelled my career at M.W. Kellogg and subsequently at Esso and Mobil. During the mid-1970s, while at Mobil, I led in major revisions of the design data books of the American Petroleum Institute, based on the Lee-Kesler thermodynamic correlations which I had co-authored. In 1979 I founded Kesler Engineering, a firm specializing in consulting and software development for the petroleum industry. In 2004 I sold my company to General Physics, a NYSE Corporation.

I am currently a part-time consultant to General Physics.

The Travails and Rewards of Luba and Moniek

In 1947, Luba, her husband Moniek, and their infant, Nathan, left Germany for Uruguay to join my aunt and her family in Montevideo. Moniek continued with his inventive design of electric shavers, while Luba started teaching in the local Hebrew school. A year later they moved to Buenos Aires and lived there for the next two years. In November 1950 the family, including a new infant girl, Manya, came to the United States, sponsored by my good friends, the Saltzes, who lived in Chelsea, near Boston. Frances Saltz was a sister of Frieda Lubell, and was the first contact I made, at Frieda's urging, when I came to the Boston area. I remain a close friend of the Saltzes and the Lubells to this day.

My sister and family found an apartment in New York City near Central Park, and Moniek began to work at a lathe in a toy manufacturing company called Ideal. An accident wrenched Moniek's back and forced him to stay in bed for nearly a year. Luba began, with Moniek's help, to assemble Swiss watches, and this activity became, essentially, their source of income, while Moniek was incapacitated.

While-bed ridden, Moniek learned of a booming cottage industry in Boro Park, Brooklyn (their new home), the manual preparation and assembly of miles of zipper tape into finished, saleable zippers. Moniek figured that most of the manual, time-consuming operations could be automated, and he proceeded to design machines to do that. These new machines essentially automated the manufacturing of zippers, cutting costs and accelerating production; they were commercially successful as well. Luba worked side by side with Moniek as business manager of the enterprise. In 1980 with 60 patents to

Moniek's name and 120 workers in their factory, Moniek and Luba sold their business to ICI, a major British chemical manufacturer.

Luba and Moniek had a third child, Rose. Their children gave birth to children and grandchildren. Luba and Moniek live in Brooklyn, as do their progeny of 27.

In 2005, Luba prepared a tape of reminiscences of our war experiences. This tape and numerous discussions I have had with Luba and Moniek laid the ground- work for this book. Indeed, Luba's uncanny memory helped me dig out many facts buried by layers of cobwebs spun by time.

Hershl's Testimony

Hershl, my cousin, was released from the Siberian slave-labor camp in 1956 after Khrushchev's rise to power. He made his way to Israel with the help of his sister, Eeta, and her husband Gerson, who had made *Aliyah* from Germany's Displaced Persons' Camp to Israel in 1948. Hershl stayed with Eeta for a couple of years and then married a concentration camp survivor, and opened a soft goods store with Gershon's help.

I visited Hershl in 1958, while he was still with Eeta and her family in an exclusive section of Tel Aviv. He was excited to see me since he never thought I would see him again. I looked at him bewildered. He seemed to have changed very little. I told him he looked wonderful. He said Eeta had not stopped feeding him since he came here.

After awhile, the conversation turned to Hershl's fate following his disappearance in Voroshilovograd. I learned that he and the other men apprehended by the NKVD were taken to the police station. They began interrogating him but soon found out he was deaf. They had intended to send him to the front but, after discussing it with the military, they decided to put him in a working compound in support of the troops. He was soon put in charge of provisions at the camp.

Hershl was good with numbers and accounting. They needed someone, like him, to take care of their books. However, his undoing was when he caught a couple of truck drivers who short-changed the deliveries to the camp.

On Christmas Eve 1941, the two truck drivers, drunk, slammed into the electric-generator station of the camp, knocking out the electricity. The military police apprehended Hershl as a suspect and began questioning him. They accused him of directing the truck drivers to sabotage the compound, and wanted to know whom he was

connected with outside the compound. He kept insisting that he was innocent and had no involvement in the accident. They sent him away to several prisons and finally to the Lubyanka prison in Moscow.

They put Hershl in a small cell under intense light, and wouldn't let him sleep for weeks. They would pour cold water on him or hit him with electric shocks if he would close his eyes. They accused him of being a German spy, and insisted that he sign a confession. After a month or more of no sleep, and a daily ration of a piece of black bread and a glass of water, Hershl became disoriented and mentally unstable. His mind went blank and he could not recall what followed next. They told him later that he had signed a piece of paper confessing to be a German spy, but he didn't remember signing it.

Two months after his arrival at Lubyanka, Hershl was sent to a slave labor camp in Siberia, near Murmansk. There he had stayed for 14 years. People came and died there, unable to withstand the cold and the hunger. Their limbs would freeze, were amputated, and they died from gangrene. He had seen thousands of people coming to the camp, and a few months later they would die.

I expressed my sympathy and horror to Hershl. I told him that I had visited Eeta in Germany and she informed me briefly of his slave-labor confinement in Siberia. I asked how he managed to survive. He said he lived day-to-day hoping for the best.

He was friends with everybody. He tried to meet his quotas and never complained. He protected his limbs in the winter. He would get lots of newspapers and wrap them around his feet. Most of all, he kept his spirit up. He knew that he was still better off than his wife and child and family that had been left behind. He decided to live on.

It was Gershon and Eeta who helped him leave prison. Gershon had hired a lawyer in 1942 when he was still in Moscow. The lawyer couldn't help him at the time because of the confession that he had signed. But he continued being on Hershl's case; in 1956, as the regime softened under Khrushchev, he managed to have the case reviewed. Hershl was released, made his way back to Poland and from there to Israel.

Hershl lived comfortably in Israel until the age of 96. He died in 2000.

Appendix I – Historical Notes

Dubno, a Shtetl No More

Jews began to settle in Dubno, a town in Volhynia, Poland (today Ukraine), in the early 16th century. They numbered approximately 2,000 at the time of the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648-49. Between 1,100 and 1,500 were murdered by the Cossacks in 1648 after being denied refuge in the local fortress. Within a short time the community was once again among the most important in the region, with representation on the Council of the Four Lands. Economic prosperity continued throughout the 18th century, allowing a large stone synagogue to be built in 1782-84. A Hebrew printing press was set up in 1794 and operated for 30 years. Among the city's prominent figures was R. Yaakov Kranz (1741-1804), known as the Maggid of Dubno, the most famous Jewish preacher in Lithuania in the 18th century. Under Russian rule, economic decline set in, though the Jewish population rose to 7,108 (out of a total 14,257) in 1897. Two fires, in 1878 and 1895, caused great damage and necessitated outside help to rehabilitate the community. The Hovevei Zion movement held yearly meetings in Dubno from 1893 and a number of Haskala Jews were active there. After the February 1917 Russian Revolution, Jewish public life flourished, but in the chaos of civil war, 18 Jews were murdered in a pogrom stage by Cossack soldiers in March 1918. Between the World Wars, Jews also engaged in light industry and were prominent as exporters of hops and grains. About 85% of petty trade of Dubno was in Jewish hands. The community ran a hospital, orphanage, and old age home, while a Tarbut school reached an enrollment of 400, and a private Jewish high school another 120. All the Zionist parties were active as well as many of the youth movements.

The Germans entered Dubno on June 25, 1941. On June 30, 23 Jews were taken outside the city and murdered and on July 22, another 80 were killed at the Jewish cemetery. A Judenrat was established on August 3. On August 21, 1941, 1,075 mostly Jewish men were executed at the cemetery. In March 1942, Ukrainian peasants were invited by the Germans to "clean out" Jewish homes. A ghetto was set up on April 2, 1942 under a continuing regime of forced labor. All but skilled workers and their families were executed on May 26-27, leaving 4,500 in the ghetto including workers from surrounding settlements. These were murdered on October 5, 1942. Around 400 Jews survived the war – 120 in hiding and the others in the USSR.

[Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust – Shmuel Spector, New York University Press, 2001, Pages 336-337]

The Great Synagogue of Dubno

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Mark Sherman, Delmar, C.A.

Testimony of a Survivor of the Dubno Ghetto

Note: In 1995 the East Brunswick Jewish Center, in New Jersey, held a service to commemorate the Holocaust, under the title "Dubno a Shtetl No More." Mrs. Irene Tannen, a lawyer and a survivor of the Dubno Ghetto, was invited to address the gathering. Following is a record of Irene's remarks.

We are assembled today for a memorial service for the parents and family members of Michael Kesler, Harold Greenspan, mine and all the thousand and thousands of Jews, who had been killed during the Nazi-Occupation time in our home town Dubno/Poland and all other places.

Michael Kesler and Harold Greenspan gave you a background about our home town and the events which followed immediately after the Germans crossed the Soviet border Sunday, June 22, 1941. Michael and Harold did not have to witness the human degradation, the life in the ghetto, the every day atrocities, the selection processes and finally the deaths of the beloved. I had witnessed all of these; I survived.

When Michael Kesler approached me to share the ghetto experiences, it was for me an emotional decision. During the more than fifty years which elapsed, I tried to suppress all these memories. After Michael's approach, I started to reconstruct the events. Here they are:

Sunday, June 22, 1941 and Monday, young men were being drafted, the Soviet administration--Police, City Hall and others--were nervous waiting for directions from higher authorities. The high officials were putting their families on trains and trucks heading east. Jewish families were gathering to decide what to do--to stay or to escape; where to escape; how to escape; who of the family should escape. Big decisions; emotional decisions. The main concern of each family was the young people whom they considered to be most vulnerable. On June 24, 1941, we heard already some artillery activity, and on June 25th, the first SS Einsatzgruppen arrived in Dubno.

Two days later the Einsatzgruppen swept the Jewish quarter and with the assistance of the local Ukrainian para-military gangs rounded up close to 800 Jewish males. They were marched to the Jewish cemetery, summarily executed and their bodies thrown into huge dug-outs. Among these men was my older brother, who left behind his young wife and a three year old girl, Miriam; among those men was also the father of my girlfriend with whom I survived, Rafael Bogdanow. The terror and the panic among the Jews were unbearable.

During the first week of invasion, the SS people began to organize the persecution and ultimate execution of the Jewish community. They established a Judenrat a Jewish representation body - and they forced the Judenrat to submit names of the best known and honorable Jews in town; these people were picked up and hanged in the town center. Then, the German authorities issued an order for all Jews to wear an arm band with the Star of David. This was followed by another order for Jews to deliver to the authorities all jewelry in their possession.

Then came the selection process of girls and young women. It began with the SS running through the Jewish homes, and rounding up young women and girls into one crowded area. The SS people also searched in places around the house, where young women might be hiding. They herded the crowd and women on the street - whoever was there at the time – into a large restaurant. Following that, the SS searched for and apprehended women who had escaped and were hiding in surrounding areas; these women were also brought to the restaurant.

I was there. The SS were like wild animals. We were beaten with whips and forced into adjoining rooms. After many hours we were released; however, many of the victims disappeared, and were never heard from again.

While these atrocities were going on, the Jews had to work to get food. We sold whatever we could. Sometime in the middle of July the German government forcibly transported the Jews from the surrounding small towns to Dubno, and placed them in designated areas along the whole length of Stara Street and its neighboring narrow side streets. This was the beginning of the Dubno Ghetto.

In the winter of 1941, we all were in the Ghetto. There was not enough food; the quarters were cold, and the older people and the children were getting ill and dying. The designated area for the Jews, the Ghetto, was small. During the winter of 1941, the Jews had to deliver furs to the German authorities. One of our school friends was arrested and shot because he was listening to news on the radio. It is hard for a human being to imagine the every day life in the Ghetto, the struggle to survive during the day and to see the beloved again in the evening. During that time, several "actions" took place with several thousand people herded, marched out of the Ghetto, then shot and buried in the ravines at the outskirts of Dubno.

In the late summer of 1942, a large scale "action" by the SS squads inflicted horrible deaths of nearly 3,000, in the Dubno Ghetto. I escaped during this action. The final liquidation of the Dubno Ghetto was in October 1942. Several dozens of our brothers and sisters managed to escape the slaughter. They found refuge in the villages of mainly Czech and some Polish peasants who, in many cases, paid with their own lives and the lives of their families to save Jews. In my family, two children of my older sister found refuge, in the winter of 1943, in a Czech small village of about 30 families. The villagers decided that the children, ages 7 and 8, would be every week in a different household. This lasted for over a year, and all the villagers, including the children, kept secret that the two Jewish children were hiding in their midst.

Testimony of a German Witness of Dubno Executions

Note: A further step toward the carrying out of a policy of mass murder was the creation of the Einsatzgruppen. These special mobile killing units followed the German army into Eastern Europe where they rounded up Jews, often luring them by promising that they would be "resettled" elsewhere. At the trial of the Einsatzgruppen leaders at Nuremberg in 1947, Herman Graebe, manager of a German construction company, described how one group of victims was rounded up and executed in Dubno, the Ukraine, on October 5, 1942.

My foreman and I went directly to the pits. I heard rifle shots in quick succession from behind one of the earth mounds. The people who had got off the trucks – men, women and children of all ages--had to undress upon the order of an S.S. man, who carried a riding or dog whip. They had to put down their clothes in fixed places, sorted according to shoes, top clothing and under-clothing. I saw a heap of shoes of about 800 to 1,000 pairs, great piles of underlinen and clothing.

Without screaming or weeping these people undressed, stood around in family groups, kissed each other, said farewells and waited for a sign from another S.S. man, who stood near the pit, also with a whip in his hand. During the 15 minutes that I stood near the pit I heard no complaint or plea for mercy.

An old woman with snow-white hair was holding a one year old child in her arms and singing to it and tickling it. The child was cooing with delight. The parents were looking on with tears in their eyes. The father was holding the hand of a boy about 10 years old and speaking to him softly; the boy was fighting his tears. The father pointed to the sky, stroked his head and seemed to explain something to him.

At that moment the S.S. man at the pit shouted something to his comrade. The latter counted off about 20 persons and instructed them to go behind the earth mound. I well remember a girl, slim and with black hair, who as she passed close to me, pointed to herself and said: "twenty-three years old."

I walked around the mound and found myself confronted by a tremendous grave. People were closely wedged together and lying on top of each other so that only their heads were visible. Nearly all had blood running over their shoulders from their heads. Some of the people were still moving. Some were lifting their arms and turning their heads to show that they were still alive. The pit was already two-thirds full. I estimated that it contained about a thousand people. I looked for the man who did the shooting. He was an S.S. man, who sat at the edge of the narrow end of the pit, his feet dangling into the pit. He had a Tommy-Gun on his knees and was smoking a cigarette.

The people, completely naked, went down some steps and clambered over the heads of the people lying there to the place to which the S.S. man directed them. They lay down in front of the dead or wounded people; some caressed those who were still alive and spoke to them in a low voice. Then I heard a series of shots. I looked into the pit and saw that the bodies were twitching or the heads lying already motionless on top of the bodies that lay beneath them. Blood was running from their necks.

The next batch was approaching already. They went down into the pit, lined themselves up against the previous victims and were shot.

Reference: Page 104 of testimony at the Nuremberg Trial

The extermination of Jews in Lvov and Galacia

The city of Lvov

The city of Lvov in southeastern Poland was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1939, under the terms of the German-Soviet Pact. There were over 200,000 Jews in Lvov in September 1939; nearly 100,000 were Jewish refugees from German-occupied Poland. The Germans subsequently occupied Lvov after their invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Encouraged by German forces to begin violent actions against the Jewish population in Lvov, Ukrainian nationalists massacred about 4,000 Jews in early July 1941. Another pogrom, known as the Petliura Days, was organized in late July. This pogrom was named for Simon Petliura, who had organized anti-Jewish pogroms in the Ukraine after World War I. For three days, Ukrainian militants went on a rampage through the Jewish districts of Lvov. They took groups of Jews to the Jewish cemetery and to Lunecki prison and shot them. More than 2,000 Jews were murdered and thousands more were injured.

In early November 1941, the Germans established a ghetto in the north of Lvov. German police shot thousands of elderly and sick Jews as they crossed the bridge on Peltewna Street on their way to the ghetto. In March 1942, the Germans began deporting Jews from the ghetto to the Belzec extermination camp.

By August 1942, more than 65,000 Jews had been deported from the Lvov ghetto and murdered. Thousands of Jews were sent for forced labor to the nearby Janowska camp. In early June 1943, the Germans destroyed the ghetto, killing thousands of Jews in the process. The remaining ghetto residents were sent to the Janowska forced-labor camp or deported to Belzec.

Reference: Holocaust Encyclopedia

Report On the Solution of the Jewish Problem in Galicia (June 30, 1943) Reich Secret Document

To the Higher SS and Police Leader East
SS Obergruppenfuhrer and General of the Police
Kruger

Enclosed I forward the first copy of the final report on the Solution of the Jewish Question in the District of Galicia, and request that you may acknowledge it.

Katzmann,

SS Gruppenfuhrer, and Generalleutnant of Police

Solution of the Jewish Problem In The District Of Galicia

Owing to the phrase "Galician Jew," Galicia was probably the small corner on earth most known and most frequently mentioned in connection with the Jews. Here they lived in great, compact multitudes, forming a world of their own, from which the rest of world Jewry renewed its population continuously. Jews were to be met with in their hundreds of thousands in all parts of Galicia.

According to old statistics dating back to 1931, there were then about 502,000 Jews. This number is unlikely to have diminished in the period between 1931 and the summer of 1941…The city of Lvov alone housed about 160,000 Jews in the months of July-August, 1941.

Our first measure was to identify every Jew by means of a white armlet with the blue Star of David. In accordance with a decree issued by the Governor General, the Interior Administration was responsible for the identifying and registration of the Jews, as well as setting up the Judenrat. Our task as police was first of all to fight effectively against the immense black market operated by the Jews all over the District. Energetic measures also had to be taken against idlers loafing around and against do- nothings.

The best means for this was the establishment of Forced Labor Camps by the SS and Police Leader. There was, first of all, work on the urgently needed reconstruction of highway Dg., 4., which was extremely important for the entire southern section of the Front and which was in catastrophically bad condition. On October 15, 1941, a start was made on the building of camps along the railroad tracks, and after a few weeks…7 camps had been put up, containing 4,000 Jews. More camps soon followed, so that in a very

short period of time, the completion of 15 such camps could be reported to the Higher SS and Police Leader. About 20,000 Jewish laborers passed through these camps in the course of time.

At the same time all other Jews who were fit for work were registered by the Labor Offices and directed to useful work. Both when the Jews were identified with the Star of David and when they were registered by the Labor Offices, the first indications were noted that the Jews were trying to evade the orders issued by the Authorities. The control measures carried out as a result led to thousands of arrests. It became increasingly apparent that the Civil Administration was not in a position to move the Jewish problem to an even reasonably satisfactory solution. Because repeated attempts of the City Administration of Lvov, for instance, to move the Jews into a Jewish quarter, failed, this question, too, was solved by the SS and Police Leader and his organizations. This measure had become all the more urgent because in the winter of 1941, centers of typhus infection had appeared all over the city, endangering not only the local population but, even more, the German troops either stationed in the city of passing through …

Owing to the peculiarity that almost 90 percent of the artisans in Galicia consisted of Jews, the problem to be solved could only be carried out gradually, as an immediate removal of the Jews would not have been in the interest of the war economy… Draconic measures had to be introduced by us after it was noted in increasing numbers of cases that the Jews had succeeded in making themselves indispensable to their employers by provided goods in short supply, etc. It is very sad to have to note that the wildest black-market deals with the Jews were made by Germans who were brought here, and in particular those in the so-called "operating firms" or the "ill-reputed trustees, both of which operated Jewish firms taken from their owners. Cases were known when Jews seeking to obtain some kind of working certificate not only did not ask for pay from their employers, but paid regularly themselves…

As the Administration was not in the position to overcome this chaos, and proved weak, the whole issue of Jewish labor was simply taken over by the SS and Police Leader. The existing Jewish Labor Offices, which were staffed by hundreds of Jews, were dissolved. All work certificates issued by firms and official employers were declared invalid, and the cards given to Jews by the Labor Offices revalidated by the Police.

In the course of this Aktion thousands of Jews were again caught in possession of forged certificates or labor certificates obtained fraudulently by means of all kinds of excuses. These Jews were also sent for special treatment. The Wehrmacht authorities in particular aided the Jewish parasites by issuing special certificates without proper control…There were cases where Jews were caught with from 10 to 20 such certificates. When Jews were arrested in the course of further checks, most of the employers felt obliged to attempt to intervene in favor of the Jews. This was often done in a manner that can only be described as deeply shameful…

Despite all these measures for the regulation of Jewish labor, a start was made in April, 1942, on the evacuation of Jews from the District of Galicia, and this was carried out steadily.

When the Higher SS and Police Leader again intervened in the Jewish question in general on November 10, 1942, and a Police Order was issued for the formation of *Jewish* quarters, 254,989 Jews had already been evacuated or resettled. Since the Higher SS and Police Leader gave further instructions to accelerate the total evacuation of the Jews, further considerable work was necessary in order to catch those Jews who were, for the time being, to be left in the armaments factories. These remaining Jews were declared labor prisoners of the Higher SS and Police Leader and held either in the factories themselves or in camps erected for this purpose. For Lvov itself a large camp was erected on the outskirts, which holds 8,000 Jewish labor prisoners at the present time. The agreement made with the Wehrmacht concerning employment and treatment of the labor prisoners was set down in writing …

In the meantime, further evacuation was carried out vigorously, with the result that by June 23, 1943, all Jewish quarters could be dissolved. Apart from the Jews in camps under the control of the SS and Police Leader, the District of Galicia is thus free of Jews.

Individual Jews occasionally picked up by the Order Police or the Gendarmerie were sent for special treatment. Altogether, 434,329 Jews had been evacuated up to June 27, 1943…(This is followed by a list of 21 camps in which there were still 21,156 Jews.)

Together with the evacuation Aktionen Jewish property was collected. Valuables were secured and handed over to the Special Staff "Reinhard…."

There were also other immense difficulties during the Aktionen as the Jews tried to avoid evacuation by all possible means. They not only tried to escape, and concealed themselves in the most improbable places, drainage canals, chimneys, even in sewage pits, etc. They barricaded themselves in catacombs of passages, in cellars made into bunkers, in holes in the earth, in cunningly contrived hiding places, in attics and sheds, inside furniture, etc.

As the number of Jews still remaining decreased their resistance became the greater. They used weapons of all types for their defense and in particular those of Italian origin. The Jews bought these Italian weapons from Italian soldiers stationed in the district in exchange for large sums in zlotys…

Subterranean bunkers were discovered which had cleverly concealed entrances, some in the flats, and some out of doors. In most cases the entrance to the bunker was only just large enough for one person to slip through. The entrances to the bunkers were so well hidden that they could not be found if one did not know where to look …

Owing to increasingly grave reports of the growing arming of the Jews, the sharpest possible measures were taken for the elimination of Jewish banditry in all parts of the

District of Galicia in the last two weeks of June 1943. Special measures were needed for the breaking up of the Jewish quarter in Lvov, where the bunkers described above had been installed. In order to avoid losses to German forces, brutal measures had to be taken from the outset; several houses were blown up or destroyed by fire.

Reference: This letter is from the JEWISH VIRTUAL LIBRARY, a Division of the American- Israeli Cooperative Enterprise

Supplemental Reading:

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/
(The encyclopedia provides important information about the pre-war state of the Jews and their extermination in Europe including the towns and cities of the Ukraine mentioned in the book.)

JEWISH VIRTUAL LIBRARY, a Division of the American- Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/

Appendix II - *Barbarossa*

The following is a sketchy account of a heavy, complex war. It is intended to provide a guide – albeit a superficial one – of the events and travels described in the main chapters. The material in this Appendix, and the figures given in the table below, are taken from the references quoted at the end of the Appendix. Note that the references are relatively recent, post-war studies.

Overview

Barbarossa, the code name for Hitler's onslaught on Russia, begun on June 22, 1941, was the most massive military operation in history. At its initial stage, the operation involved the following, estimated forces:

	Germany and Allies	**Red Army**
Divisions	166	190
Personnel	4,306,800	3,289,851
Guns and mortars	42,601	59,787
Tanks (incl assault guns)	4,171	15,687
Aircraft	4,846	10,743

Source: Mikhail Meltyukhov, *Stalin's Missed Chance*, Table 47, p. 445

Initial Phase

At the beginning of the war, the front stretched for approximately 1500 kilometers, from the Black to the Baltic Seas. The German onslaught was organized in three theatres; Leningrad in the north, Belarus, Smolensk and Moscow in the center and Lvov and Kiev in the South. The ultimate destination of the central theatre was Moscow. The southern theatre aimed its assault at capturing the Ukraine and Stalingrad, the gateway to Azerbaijan oil. The southern theatre encompassed, initially, the axis of Rovno, Lutsk and Dubno, my hometown.

The First Week of Disaster

During the first week of Barbarossa, the Soviets suffered enormous losses of thousands of aircraft on the ground, thousands of tanks, and over a million soldiers. They also lost essentially all the territories they acquired from 1939 till 1941. These heavy losses were due to a number of factors:

- Surprise of the onslaught. In the early hours of June 22, the Germans managed, by surprise, to bomb the Soviets' airfields and practically eliminate its combat Air Force. Elements of surprise also helped the Germans clear large areas of the Soviets' defense lines.
- Lack of Soviets' preparedness. The Soviets had enormous equipment, and infantry men to defend the border, but no unified organization to coordinate and effectively utilize these forces. They lacked communications and efficient organization. The shadow of Stalin and fear of retribution paralyzed the initiative of individual commanders. The failures of the Soviets to decisively defeat the small Finnish army a year earlier spread a heavy pall of apprehension and timidity in the armed forces.
- Poor roads. John Erickson in his book, ***On the Road to Stalingrad***, vividly describes Soviet tanks being lined up, as sitting ducks, on impassible roads in Belarus and the Ukraine, making it easy for the German Luftwaffe to destroy them *en-masse.*
- Superiority of German forces. The Soviets may have had more tanks and more aircraft than the Germans, but most of them were of a much older vintage. The Soviet Air Force, whatever survived the massive elimination of Soviet aircraft on the ground, proved no match to the new *Messerschmitts.* And, the superbly trained German soldiers fought with a ferocity and skillfulness unknown to Soviet soldiers.
- A wavering allegiance of Soviet population. The Ukrainians and the Byelorussians particularly in the areas conquered by the Soviets in 1939 were hostile to the Soviet Regime. Many Ukrainian soldiers surrendered (only to be later killed by the Germans).

Despite the disadvantages and the setbacks, Soviet commanders – individually or in unison with others – mounted significant counterattacks, which slowed the German advance. Particularly east of the old Polish-Russian border.

Lutsk–Rovno–Dubno Axis of Combat

This axis became the center of intensive fighting, in the first week of Barbarossa. The single, most critical event took place on June 25th, 1941 at Brody, 60 km. southwest of Dubno, with a clash between large tank forces of the two armies. The German panzer divisions outnumbered and outmaneuvered the Soviets and won a decisive battle that opened the eastward gates of the axis.

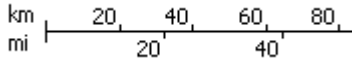
A major reason for Soviet defeat at Brody was the Soviets' inability to supply more tanks to the ensuing battle, mainly due to poor roads, as well as poor communications. Meanwhile, the German Panzer Division 11 penetrated northeast of Brody and on June 25th arrived in Dubno (approximately 12 hours after my sister and I left home). Soviet forces, Mechanized Divisions 228, 213 and Tank Division 43 counter-attacked and pushed the Germans back. However, two days later on June 27, the Germans retook Dubno. Later that day, they entered Ostrog about the same time my sister and I were leaving Ostrog. Two days later German forces crossed the old Soviet Polish border and entered Shepetovka; a few hours earlier we had caught the last train out of Shepetovka.

At the same time, big clashes took place between the Soviet and German forces around Lvov, approximately 150 km. southwest of Dubno. On June 29th, General Vlasov, a Ukrainian, commanding a major motorized Soviet army, surrendered. Thus, within one week of Barbarossa, the Germans reached the old Soviet Polish border of the Ukraine, and opened the roads for their advance towards Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine.

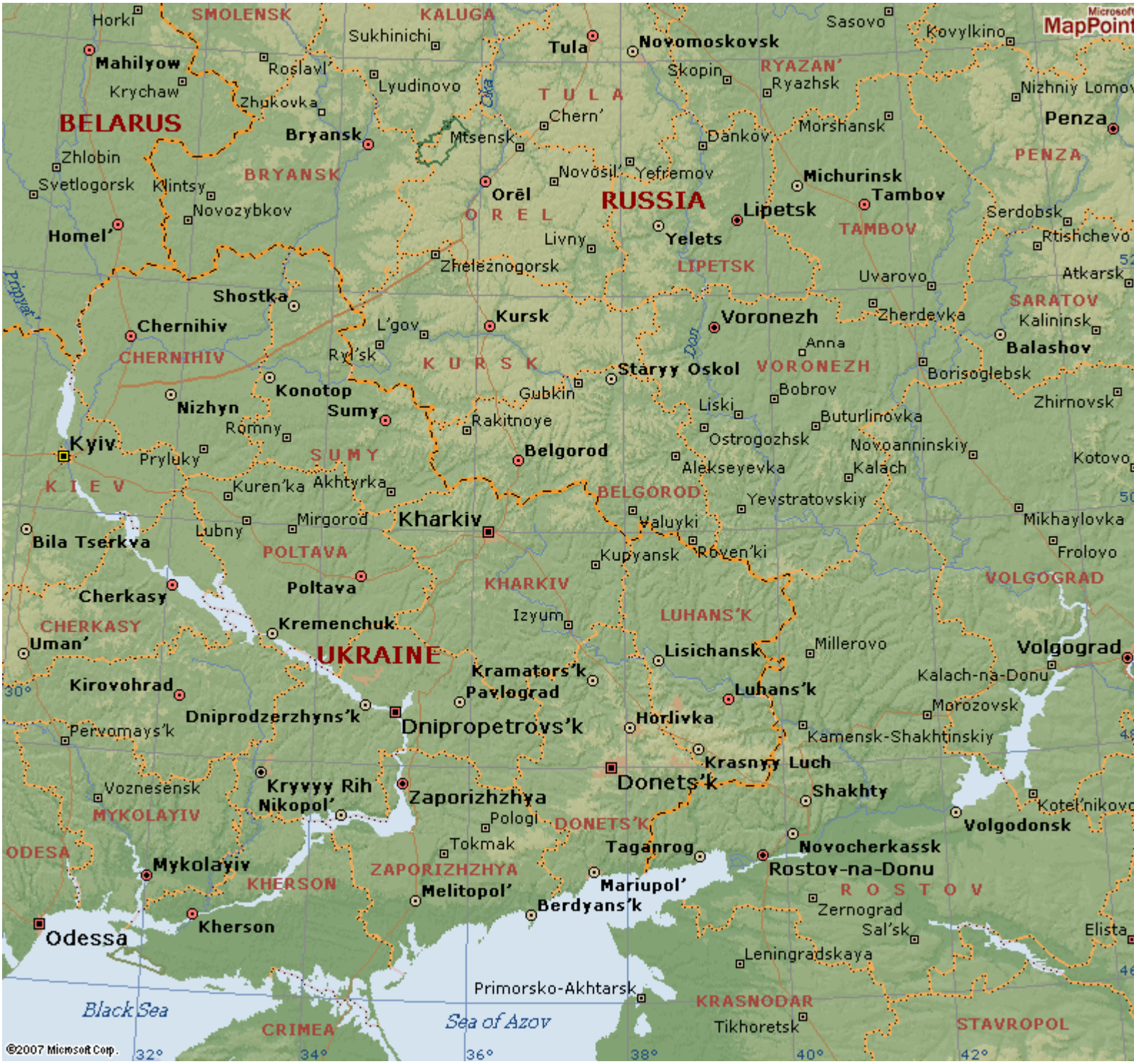
Appendix III: Dubno; Maps of Western Ukraine, of the Road to Stalingrad, and to Uzbekistan

MAP OF WESTERN UKRAINE

Reference: MSN ENCARTA



Map of the Ukraine and the Road to Stalingrad



Reference: MSN ENCARTA

km 50 100 150 200
mi 40 80 120

From Stalingrad to Uzbekstian

Reference: MSN ENCARTA

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